

EXALTED

THIRD EDITION

THE SILENCE OF OUR ANCESTORS



JAMES HUGGINS

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To Arem, Zan, and Zhui. It was a joy sharing Creation with you.



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Prologue

In the distant northwest of Creation, where tundra gives way to water and ice, there was once a merchant galley called *Torun's Venture*. It had reached the edges of the known world and returned to warmer climes eleven times, each time bearing skins and furs of exotic beasts, and jewels of auroric ice. Though the furs demanded payments of blood and courage, the jewels were purchased more dearly. The ship's old hands never spoke to new hires of the cruel and lovely strangers who live at the world's northern edge, or of the price *Torun's Venture* had repeatedly paid. Those who reached journey's end and accepted the price were old hands ever after. Those who disagreed were among those who never returned south.

On the southward leg of its twelfth journey, *Torun's Venture* carried a witch. She had set a man's broken leg and advised the crew on the direction of fresh air through the ship's miasmatic bowels. She had spoken of the meanings in stars, and of how to set the dead to rest, topics dear to any experienced sailor's heart. The old hands had discussed over games of knucklebones whether to throw her overboard as an ill omen for the ship, but the ship's air did smell clearer and the bones rolled true enough, so she stayed.

The witch declined to reveal her name or occupation to the sailors and had offered the captain additional silver instead of those things. She kept her face and hair obscured with a hood, but the hood couldn't hide her ice-blue eyes, or the fact that she didn't shiver when a chill wind blew out from the coast. The captain reckoned the woman was a criminal, or cursed, or afflicted with some unnatural parentage, or all three. He took all the silver she had and agreed to take her as far as the city of Fajad to the southeast if she didn't cause any trouble. She seemed both offended and grateful.

When she wasn't eating, sleeping, or acting as the ship's unofficial doctor, the witch preferred to sit upon the railing of the crow's nest. She had good balance and no fear of heights, and she kept her eyes on the northern horizon, except when something interrupted her.

"What's it like to be a Prince of the Earth?" asked her current companion, Riene, standing in the crow's nest proper.

Riene was a new hire, a fisherwoman's daughter who had "nobody left to stay home for," an unusually strong grip, and a lot of questions. She'd boarded *Torun's Venture* the same day the witch did. The more of her own knowledge and training

the witch let slip, the more curiosity Riene showed. After a time, the witch gave in and began to answer questions, too many for comfort. She even revealed her name, which was Decea.

“If I knew,” said Decea, “I would tell you. I am no prince of anything.”

“But you said—” began Riene, before Decea gestured for her to keep her voice down. Riene continued, more quietly, “You said you bore the blood and gifts of the Elemental Dragons. Aren’t you one of the Exalted, chosen by the Dragons?”

Decea sighed. “I do. I am. But...” She thought about what her family had taught her about the Realm, the vast and mighty empire that stretched out from Creation’s distant center. She remembered tales of the Realm’s ruling Dynasty of Dragon-Blooded, of their wealth and glory, and of the pitiless legions with which they scoured away their enemies. She remembered seeing the ghosts those self-proclaimed Princes of the Earth and their legions had left behind.

“I am just a traveler trying to reach Fajad,” Decea said finally.

“No,” insisted Riene, “The Exalted are heroes. You’re clever and nimble and you don’t feel the cold—”

“I feel the cold.” Decea’s tone was so freezing sharp that it surprised them both. Riene went silent, but Decea kept going: “And if you have heard so much about the Exalted, you should know that we do not brook silly, short-lived mortals telling us what we can and cannot do.”

Riene’s eyes locked on the horizon. She asked no more questions.

Decea felt sick. That hadn’t been what she wanted to say. She had wanted to say, *I am still young, and I have seen enough of death and the Exalted both. If I were a Dynast, a Prince of the Earth, they would put me to work in their bloody wars and political games and I do not want that ever again. I just want to find a place crowded enough to get lost in.*

Decea felt it would come out wrong if she tried to say any of that, or anything at all, so she didn’t. All was silent save the choppy waves and the cold wind.

The sun did not move very far before that wind changed. The smell of it made the hairs on the back of Decea’s neck stand up. “A storm’s coming,” she hissed.

Riene hesitated just long enough to look in Decea’s eye and see the fear in them. Then she sounded the alarm.

The veteran crew responded quickly, of course, but they took a little time to accept the threat. The sky was clear, free of storm omens, and Riene was a new hire. But the witch had spoken, and she hadn’t yet spoken falsely. So the captain gave his orders and the crew prepared for a storm.



In the distant northwest of Creation, where people cling to life and to death in equal measure, there was once a fishing port called Elknell. The mortal folk who lived there were hardy and homely even by the standards of a world as unkind as

Creation. Elknellfolk held fast to traditions that were old when their ancestors' ancestors had settled the rocky bay. They wore iron over their hearts, paid blood to the sea for every haul of whitefish, and never suffered debt to an outsider. For these reasons, they survived and prospered where towns before them hadn't.

For these reasons, also, the trapper and her boy had come to stay, some thirteen winters past.

The trapper was foreign-born, exiled from a tribe of nomad cannibals — or so said the townsfolk. She hid her tattoos and her accent when in town, and she earned a reliable living. She brought deer meat and rabbit skins and helped folks fend off foxes, and she didn't haggle like a merchant. She knew how to treat Elknellfolk, and that included living a ways off from them, in a cabin she'd built and expanded over the years.

The Elknellfolk rarely saw the trapper's boy. They stated as fact that he roamed the nearby forests like a feral ghost, that he'd eaten his brothers and sisters, that any man or woman who heard his voice would die by season's end. He only came to town with his mother briefly each year, during the five days and nights of Calibration, when the world's walls were thin and much was uncertain. Even then, he never spoke.

The way the trapper put it to her boy was this: Many in Creation were unlucky, and the boy happened to wear his bad luck on his face. So the boy kept his face covered and his mouth closed among the townsfolk, and didn't upset anybody.

Today, the trapper and her boy were doing trappers' work out in the woods. It was early spring, and rhubarb poked up through the snow. The trapper was bundled heavily in furs, but out here the boy didn't need to bother. The trapper's boy had gray fur of his own and didn't fear the cold as a normal boy might. He liked to roam the woods and often jogged ahead of his mother, listening for caught and struggling animals. The trapper could follow her boy's tracks, and the boy could hear his mother's whistle from a mile away, so neither of them ever lost the other.

The boy had climbed every tree in the forest, or so he liked to believe. He enjoyed climbing, and finding places where nobody would find him, among evergreen needles. He didn't know what it meant to be a lord or master of a place, or he might have imagined himself that way. Instead, his mother had taught him about the spirits that lived unseen in every part of Creation, and the boy thought of himself like that. He never felt more powerful than when he was hidden. Sometimes the boy saw hunters creeping below and imagined what it would be like to jump down and frighten them. More often, he honed his archery skills on passing animals.

It was afternoon now, and the boy had spent an hour watching a doe wander closer and closer, until it was very nearly underneath him. A part of the boy knew he should ready his bow or his axe, but he found himself so focused, so tense. His fingers curled, and he could not get out of his mind the dream of falling upon his prey, of wrestling and biting with sharp teeth, of tasting the doe's blood while it was still warm.

Then the boy's mother whistled in the distance, and the dream turned sordid and guilty. This wasn't how men hunted. He growled, at the deer or at his own

foolishness, but only the deer heard and fled. The boy descended in a few careful falls to go find his mother.

The trapper had already pulled a few frozen rabbits from her wicker cage traps, reset the traps and lures, and tied the rabbits to her belt. When the boy arrived, the trapper was wrestling the uncooperative body of a twenty-pound lynx from a snare trap. Judging by the disturbed brush nearby, the cat had fought the snare fiercely but without success. The boy helped his mother and carried the lynx himself.

As the two of them carried their catch back toward the trail, the boy smelled something on the wind. He clicked his tongue to catch his mother's attention, then gestured up to the sky. The trapper tested the air herself and watched the clouds. She frowned, then spoke in the hand-talk they favored with each other: *The sky-spirits are laughing. The air will hold a killing cold before nightfall.*

We can reach home quickly, signed the boy.

Not quickly enough, signed the trapper.

The boy didn't like that, never liked it when his mother refused to try, but he didn't argue. *I saw shelter back the way we came.*

The trapper nodded, for she knew the same place. They hurried back to find a fir tree with great, sloping branches, and set to reinforcing its protection with walls of snow. They worked quickly, even as the wind picked up and turned cutting, as the day dimmed and the sky rumbled. The trapper and her boy were used to working in the dark, and the boy kept packing snow with numbing hands as his mother entered the shelter, trembling.

The boy entered when the work was done, and he found that his mother had already lit a campfire within the shelter, using a flint and fir twigs. As the wind outside picked up and the fir tree shook, the trapper and her boy kept the fire small and warm in the manner of their people, whom the trapper had left when the boy was too young to remember.

An hour passed, then two, and the boy huddled with his mother to keep them both warm. As the cold worsened, though, the boy heard a wail on the wind, unlike any animal's sound. Then more wails, all together. The boy shivered and did not make a sound.



The Whispering Coast — so named, claimed the captain when in his cups, for the tale of two lovers cursed never to hear each other's call — was rocky and jagged on good days. On this day, it showed only dark cliffs to the sailors and passengers aboard *Torun's Venture*. The navigator saw their choices as these: sail out to endure the storm in deep waters, so the winds couldn't dash the ship against the cliffs, or push on along the cliffs to reach the next port quickly. The navigator was certain they would reach it soon, though it was a fishing village that had left more impression on his memory than on his map.

The captain rolled his knucklebones in private, and what he saw made him fear the dark waters more than he feared the cliffs. He gave his orders and the ship pressed on, even as a fearful wind picked up.

The sun sank toward the west, the cliffs shrank toward the east, and the sky darkened quickly. The sailors lit seal-oil lanterns at each corner and station on deck.

The witch Decea looked into the glowering sky with trepidation. She offered to help with shipboard duties but was met with glares.

“She’s got a sharp eye,” said Riene, “and she doesn’t fear to fall. Let her be the crow and let me handle rigging.”

Decea wondered if Riene’s suggestion was born from faith or resentment. Surely a storm could snap a mast as it could a tree. But Decea still climbed up into to the crow’s nest and stood in it proper. She tied her waist to it and held a knife and her oiled rucksack close just in case she needed them.

From the crow’s nest, Decea could see the storm’s birth and furious growth play out. She saw the sky darkening, felt the ship’s rocking, heard the sailors’ shouts and the distant thunder. She saw flickers of light in the blackness above, crackles of brilliance slithering through the clouds like a dragon. She felt a kinship to the raw serpentine power above, for it was the same power that flowed through her veins. Perhaps it was a message from the Elemental Dragon of Air who made her his Chosen. Perhaps he judged her for the cowardly choices that had put her on this ship and brought this storm upon *Torun’s Venture* to punish her.

Decea wondered, giddily, if the Dragon would hear her if she shouted into the wind. She might have a few choice things to say if so.

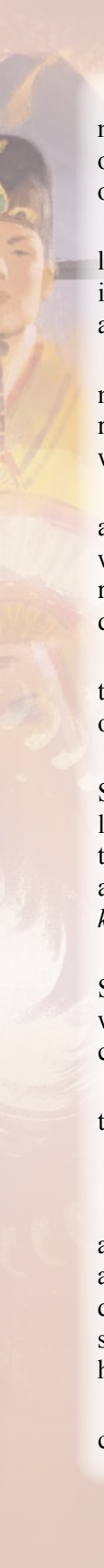
Rain fell as suddenly as any crashing wave, and sensible fear returned. Decea lowered her gaze to the darkened coastline. She thought of boats and firelight, as if her thoughts might summon those things to view. She looked for any signs of a port.

Lightning struck the sea, and the witch saw for miles. She saw no boats and no fires, only rain and the cliffs, closer than she’d realized. She shouted down a warning, but thunder shook her body and drowned out her voice. The sailors below didn’t need her warning, anyway; they knew cliffs, and what to do about them.

Decea didn’t know the sailors’ arts but she could follow some of what they did. She saw the billowing sails taken down and oars heaving mightily on the...port...? starboard...? side of the ship to turn it from the cliffs. She saw the ship’s navigator clinging to a railing for dear life and the spray of ocean water that broke his grasp. The cliffs lurched close to the crow’s nest, then far, then close again, as the wind and waves tipped the ship to and fro. Lightning lit it all haphazardly.

The witch felt sick and afraid and desperate. She looked away from the looming cliffs and the swinging lanterns and struggled unthinkingly against the rope that bound her. She was no lookout; she became certain the sailors let her come up here so the gods of the storm might take her as a sacrifice. She was a fool, she thought, and a dead fool at that, and if she had to die it wouldn’t be for them. Her eyes rolled around, seeking some escape.

There was a glimmer of warm light in the distance, like a lone ember in a cold fireplace. It was there and gone, swallowed by the rain, concealed by the cliff. Decea couldn’t be sure she’d seen it.



“Port!” she bellowed, and she called upon the air to carry her voice as far as it might go. It cut through the wind and rain, and every hand aboard marveled at that one word’s promise. Lightning struck the sea nearby, and they saw the witch’s arm outstretched, pointing toward hope.

The captain knew it was too late for that. If they reached the town in a storm like this, they’d only crash into it and go under anyway. He bellowed to keep veering starboard, to seek deeper water, but nobody could hear him. He was no witch, and he couldn’t command the air.

It didn’t matter. There was a crack and a groan and a sickening lurch, and the moaning cry of those who’d dared to hope. *Torun’s Venture* had struck a rock or a reef, and it was taking on water. The old hands knew their ship was dead. The call went out: All hands to the lifeboats.

Decea was educated enough to know *Torun’s Venture* would suck anyone aboard into the sea with it, and any lifeboats close enough besides. And of those who survived that, the storm would kill the rest. Out at sea, with no proper funereal rites, the dead would linger as drowned ghosts, looking for home in the murky depths of the Underworld’s seas.

Decea looked down at the ship and thought she saw Riene waving at her through the rain. Or, a cold part of Decea thought, was Riene already dead, and washed overboard? Perhaps Decea saw a ghost, looking for someone to join her in death.

Decea remembered her knife and cut the rope that bound her to the crow’s nest. She kept her eyes focused on the blackness, on where she thought that ember of light might have been. She reached out with one hand and touched her forearm, so that blue-and-black light rippled out from her fingertips. Voices from below let out alarmed cries, for even though they’d believed she was a witch, they hadn’t really *known* it.

Unbound now, the witch Decea could concentrate on reshaping her very self. She reached within, to the icy core of her heart, and let that core burst, and her body with it. She exploded into a hundred black-feathered birds, which fluttered and circled around the mast, and then flew into the night.

When they realized she wasn’t coming back, the crew of *Torun’s Venture* tried to curse her, but they didn’t know her name.



Thunder rattled the fir tree and shook snow into the shelter where the trapper and her boy waited. The small space was filled with the scents of pitch, smoke, and wet fur. On most nights, the trapper would hum the songs of her people in the dim firelight, but tonight she stayed quiet and let the fire die. Her hearing wasn’t as sharp as the boy’s, but the trapper had heard the cries outside as well. Of late, they had both become familiar with the sounds of the hungry dead.

The boy had handled many dead animals and seen few dead people. If he was unwelcome among the living, he reasoned, the dead would hardly be happier for his presence.

And while his mother had taught him to respect the living and the dead, the dead were especially not known for forgiveness. Ghosts haunted and tormented those who disrespected or forgot them, and mishandled corpses rose to seek out the warm blood of the living.

For months now, none near Elknell would travel at night, for the dead had begun roaming in packs, calling out garbled accusations and names. The boy didn't know why this plague had struck the countryside, and a part of him had burned to go out and do something about it. Tonight, that inner fire was cold, for there was only wind and snow between him and the dead, and the dead didn't fear either. He kept his axe ready, just in case.

The trapper and her boy talked off and on throughout the night, holding hands and feeling each other's hand-signs. They talked about what they'd do tomorrow, and about whether they heard footsteps outside, and about what manner of sacrifice would best appease the sky-spirits. Elknellfolk communed too much with their ancestors, according to the trapper, and needed someone to watch the skies, though they would never thank the trapper for it.

The night wore on, and the thunder quieted. Sleep came in fits. The boy rested and woke to the too-close sound of crunching snow, but whatever was nearby soon wandered away. Once their hearts stopped pounding, the trapper took her turn at rest. When she awoke, she was shivering and confused. She'd been too cold for too long without a fire, the boy knew. The small fire they tended through part of the night wasn't enough.

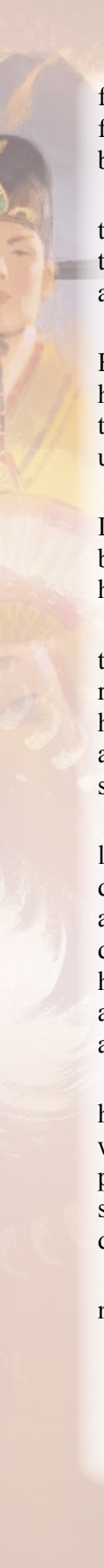
When the boy heard the first trills of birdsong, he knew dawn was close. The dead, he thought, must be on their way back to wherever they hid during the day. And his mother could not afford to wait out in the cold any longer. They smothered the fire, and the boy helped the trapper stand. They left the lynx corpse there, for they needed to move quickly.

They walked through dimly lit woods, the trapper's arm clutching her boy's shoulder, the boy with his axe ready in case any dead tarried nearby. He had never struck anything shaped like a man or woman before, but he felt he could do it. He thought he could do anything if it got his mother back to their hut, with its roaring hearth. He rushed as quickly as his mother could move, and then a little faster than that. A fire burned within him, and his breath steamed the morning air.

The boy heard the loud snap of breaking branches and the rustle of underbrush off the beaten path, and knew they'd been spotted. Had he been thinking clearly, the boy might have pushed the trapper on, or left the trapper in place to go meet the dead, but he refused to let his mother go. The boy pulled her along, brandished his axe, and howled a wordless threat at his unseen enemy.

It was no dead man or woman that crashed into him, but a beast far greater in size and strength. The black-furred beast roared, drowning out the boy's own voice, and dashed him into the snow, stunned. The trapper shouted "No!" though the boy didn't hear her, couldn't wonder whether his mother feared for the boy or herself.

The boy's thoughts swirled, and his pounding heart threatened to break out of his chest. Fear flowed through him, then anger, then something else, pure and



familiar. It was like the feeling of scaling a tree, or of killing an animal. It was the feeling of seeing his desires wrought, undeniably and irreversibly, on the world. His blood boiled with the exhilaration of power.

The boy didn't know he was changed. He didn't think about the sudden light that illuminated the path and melted snow around him. It was right and natural that the fire that was always hidden within him would be expressed through his flesh and fur, visible to the world.

The boy stood, heat swirling around him, angry red light pouring off of him. Before him stood the beast: a black-furred monster, larger than any natural animal he'd ever seen, comfortable on two legs or four. It had the boy's mother pinned to the snow-covered forest floor with a massive paw. The trapper struggled to breathe under its weight.

The boy's hands shook with fury, and he snarled a challenge at the monster. It turned to regard him, showing him its white eyes and teeth like jagged, broken bones. He rushed toward it, axe raised high, and it heaved its body around to meet him head on with a deafening roar.

Even with the heat surging through his body, the boy didn't delude himself that he could somehow match the beast's strength, so when it swung its great ivory-clawed paw toward him, the boy ducked underneath, cutting along its body with his axe as he went. The blade caught against the beast's matted fur, failing to draw any blood, and proximity to the beast made the boy gag — it had an overpowering stench of death. But the boy got past the monster, close enough to reach his mother.

The trapper, bleeding through claw-punctured furs, cried out in pain as the boy lifted her. The boy watched, transfixed for a moment, as the trapper's furs smoldered in his heated grasp. He looked into his mother's eyes and saw terror equal to any animal caught in one of her traps. The boy thought for a moment he must be dreaming, for this night seemed unreal. Then he saw his mother was looking past him and remembered the beast. He pushed his mother away with a gesture to run, and then turned to face the beast just as it wrapped one great arm around the boy and squeezed.

The boy smelled burning fur and felt his ribs crack. His axe arm was free, but he had no leverage to swing it. He saw only the bear's open maw and white eyes, wanted only to hurt it one last time. As his vision swam, the boy poured all of his power — his *fire* — into the butt of his axe and jammed it into the beast's eye. It struck true with a bloom of light, and the beast's eye popped like grease on a griddle. The monster's roar turned into a piercing cry of pain, and it flung the boy away.

The boy's back struck a tree trunk with an awful crack, and he fell into darkness.



chapter one

Those Who Survive

Having spun herself into a flock of dozens of black gulls, Decea did not know very much. Her thoughts were spread across the flock, diffuse and instinctive. She knew the weight and feel of her gull bodies, the force of wind and thunder, and her destination. It was a dangerous thing, being a flock of birds in a thunderstorm, but a flock of birds can't worry or second guess or regret. This was, insofar as Decea was capable of having an opinion on it at all, an improvement over her normal state of mind.

The storm rolled the flock-that-was-Decea north and south and flung some of her bodies into the icy sea. She lost her way more than once, and her consciousness spread far and thin as the flock scattered, searching for land or any warm light. The surviving crows of the flock took shelter under a stone outcropping for hours, until the worst of the storm passed. As soon as they were able to find their way, they took flight again, for no matter how far Decea spread herself, the flock had an overwhelming urge to find her destination and become whole again.

This was how, early in the morning, dozens of gulls wheeled and swirled into the shape of a woman on the roof of Elknell's dockside longhouse. Rain had given way to snow here on land, and it fell lightly and steadily upon Decea's hood as her mind and body regained wholeness.

Capable of complex thought again, Decea took a few moments to examine how she'd weathered the journey. She felt deep cuts and bruises where birds had been lost or injured along the flock's journey. She had little fear of bleeding out — she was Exalted and could survive injuries that might lay mortals low with faintness or infection — but she felt pain like any mortal. She determined to treat her wounds as soon as she was able.

Confident now that she'd survived her journey, Decea dared to look out over the docks. With the sun not yet risen and the sky still overcast, the only light available was the guiding bonfire that had led her to Elknell. The firelight illuminated the docks and the nearby marketplace, but the sea beyond the docks was a black void. Decea wouldn't have been able to see *Torun's Venture* even if it was still on its way.

It wasn't on its way, she was certain. It had gone under hours ago, perhaps immediately after she left it. Decea had survived, alone.

Decea thought that she should want to cry, or feel relieved, or even hate herself. She was certain that a younger Decea would have felt these things. But she

searched and found in herself only an empty heart and aching body. She sighed and looked away from the empty sea.

The town around Decea was familiar. She'd been to Elknell once before, when she was young and awkward and forbidden from walking its streets without a minder. Elknell looked much as it had back then: Tight-packed buildings of wood and stone sat upon raised platforms to weather the high tide, and a marketplace marked the meeting point between the docks and the coastal road that ran through the town. Elknell provided a place for farmers, merchants, herders, and sailors to all trade and rest amid the inescapable smell of saltwater and fish. It nestled within a cove that protected it from storms like the one Decea had escaped, and it relied upon a hardy militia to ward off raiders.

Elknell wasn't unchanged, though. Decea remembered fishing boats out to sea well before sunrise, and oven smoke rising over the town. Watching the town from the ship that had brought her here years ago, she had found it lively even in winter. It was an early spring morning now, but it was quiet, still, and empty.

Decea felt curious, tired, pained. Alone. Fortunately, she stood upon the thatched roof of the town's dockside longhouse: a place where visitors and country folk could pay for some food and shelter on cold northern nights. She walked carefully and quietly to avoid putting a foot through the roof or disturbing the people within, then stepped out into the air, calling upon the wind to slow her fall. She landed lightly by the oaken front door, and would have entered, but it was barred. So, she knocked.

When she heard no response, she called out, "Hello?"

When she still heard no response, Decea tried to sound especially pitiful — it was surprisingly easy, given how beaten down she felt. "Hello, I've survived a shipwreck. *Torun's Venture*. Please, let me in. It's very cold out here, and I'm soaking."

A man's voice sounded out through the door, muffled and youngish. "Away with you, dead thing, or we'll bring out torches. We'll not fall for your tricks."

Dead thing? wondered Decea. Her mind turned over a few possibilities. Perhaps the poltergeist that tormented the town when she was first here years ago had returned? Perhaps *Torun's Venture* wasn't the first recent shipwreck nearby, and drowned specters were arriving with the tide to tempt sailors into the dark waters? But...tonight Decea was just a waterlogged stranger, and her time aboard *Torun's Venture* had taught her that knowledge and curiosity were equally suspicious to the uneducated and superstitious. Better not to ask too many questions.

"I'm not dead," said Decea, "just nearly. Please, open the door and test the warmth of my breath, or the fluidity of my blood." She cursed herself — what resident of Elknell would know or use a word like "fluidity?" She tried to throw better words into the mixture to mask what was out of place: "I'm a doctor, if it helps. Do you have any infections or injuries you need treated? Any bones you need set?"

Silence.

"Please," Decea breathed, resting her forehead and one hand against the firm door.

“Your voice don’t tremble, stranger,” said a woman’s voice, from the other side of the door. “You’re soaking out in the cold, but your voice don’t shake. It may be you ain’t dead, but you ain’t welcome in here, neither.”

Decea laughed, though she didn’t find it funny. This again. Always this.

She had ways of getting into the longhouse, of course. Decea wasn’t especially strong of limb, but mortals would be hard pressed to keep out a determined and resourceful Exalt. But what then? She wanted comfort and conversation more than shelter, and the longhouse offered neither. Decea didn’t even have any silver to pay for food and a spot by the hearth — she’d paid the last of it to the captain of *Torun’s Venture*, and he was in no position to refund it.

Decea turned away from the door without another word and faced the most promising landmark that remained to her: the beacon bonfire.

The evening bonfire was a tradition in the busier port towns that dotted the Whispering Coast, few of which had the resources for a true lighthouse tower. Elknell’s beacon sat upon a raised stone platform in the marketplace, at least ten yards away from any other building, and even further from the docks. From there, it provided hope to sailors on the bay, burned away the morning fog, and kept warm those who had nowhere else to stay. Armed firetenders kept the bonfire alive most nights, and kept the poor and the untrustworthy from approaching it too closely.

As Decea trudged over to the bonfire, its heat and the scent of smoke went from enticing to oppressive. She reached out toward the heat and felt it spread painfully through her hands and arms. No doubt she needed some warming up, after the night she’d had. And thankfully, the firetenders didn’t try to drive her away. They merely watched her.

Tired as Decea was, it was in her nature to notice things. She noticed there were five firetenders, instead of the traditional two, and they had ringed the platform with sharpened logs to keep anyone from scaling it. She noticed there were no other outsiders or drunks huddled near the bonfire. She also noticed the bonfire — used in some towns to execute and dispose of violent criminals — had rather a lot of bones scattered among its ashes.

Decea had seen more things in her life than her years justified, and she had a regrettable tendency to assume the worst, grisliest things about people. Elknell-folk had always been as dedicated to their ancestral cults as they were distrustful of outsiders, and it was easy for Decea to conjure a vision in which Elknell made fiery sacrifices of the unwanted living for the sake of the venerable dead. From that vision, it was easy for Decea to imagine calling upon her skills of sorcerous transformation once more, to imagine fleeing as a flock of gulls again, to imagine making her way back to a home she never had any right to leave.

But Decea bore the gifts and markings of the Elemental Dragon of Air, and clarity was her birthright. She set aside her fears and her loneliness, and her desire to act, to be in control. She let all she had seen, heard, and thought fill her mind. She stopped imposing forms on the clouds of her mind, and allowed her thoughts to wander, that she might better see the true shape of the world.



Decea was home again, and young. She was full of questions and certainty in equal measure, and the shape of the world was held in books. Her skin and hair were dark, and her eyes were a grayer shade of blue.

The young Decea stood in an acolyte's robes before her great-aunt Vathys, who looked young and hale but seemed as ancient and immovable as an iceberg. "Tell me of the form of the soul," Vathys commanded.

The young Decea was eager to obey. "The soul holds two aspects, married by the breath of life. The higher soul bears our reason, duty, and faith. The lower soul bears our hunger, anger, and fear. When a person's life ends, the two halves of their soul fall away from each other."

"What becomes of the higher soul?" asked Vathys.

"It is severed from its home and seeks reincarnation. Those who cannot relinquish their old lives may linger in the Underworld, or in Creation, unseen by the living."

"Invisible, but not unheard or unfelt. And the lower soul?"

"The lower soul shelters in the corpse that was its home, for it fears sunlight. Proper rites may soothe its hunger. Without those, the lower ghost may lash out at those who come close, or even leave its corpse to hunt the living and taste their blood."

Vathys pursed her lips and looked at Decea without blinking. "You keep saying 'may.' Do you not know for certain? Are the classifications we have taught you not detailed enough to hold your interest?"

Decea hesitated. "My father says the dead are as varied as people. He says there are more forms of the dead than there are books written about them."

"You will not be tested on what your father says," said Vathys, and the room grew colder. "He does not know our ways. And you'll find as you grow older that people aren't so varied either."



Decea was in Elkneil again, and hooded, and she felt cold even through the heat of the bonfire. The sun shed its first rays over the thatched roofs of the town, and Elkneil came suddenly to life. Doors opened, fishers raced each other to the docks, and smoke rose from cookfires in many homes.

Decea felt she had begun to understand the truth of what was happening in Elkneil, but there was much she did not know. Some deathly plague surely afflicted the town, and its people had taken to burning corpses to stave off its spread. But what was the nature of the plague, and how did it cause the dead to behave? Was it a localized event, or something more widespread? Were more rational ghosts involved, or were only the hungry lower ghosts to blame? Why and how had this started, and what would Elkneil need to do to stop it?

And most importantly, had they already called an exorcist? Because if they had, Decea had no time to waste: She needed to find passage from Elknell today, before anyone could learn her name or share her bad luck, as the crew of *Torun's Venture* had. She was destitute, blessed with skills and advantages that would certainly give away her identity if advertised, and short of answers. So, she decided to go ghost hunting.

Among Decea's talents was one rare even among the Exalted: the ability to see ghosts that lurked invisibly in Creation. It was invaluable for a professional exorcist — which Decea emphatically was *not* — and gave Decea a perspective that she imagined many people lacked. Ghosts were desperate for recognition and worship, for the pieces of life now denied to them. Some were too weak to affect the physical world or communicate with mortals at all, and too bound by earthly passions to make their journeys into the Underworld. These would gladly trade any information for a prayer and a sacrifice of their favorite food, and each town had more of them than any mortal realized.

Each town except Elknell, apparently. Decea wandered the length and breadth of the rough-cobbled town, stopping at every shrine, glancing through every open window, and generally resembling Creation's most intrusive pilgrim or conspicuous thief. But she never saw a single dead man, woman, or child.

Already aching, sleep deprived, and afraid of discovery, Decea grew increasingly frustrated and distraught as the morning wore on. By noon, she felt taut and brittle, and snapped at a man in the marketplace who offered her some delicious-smelling toasted whitefish for a reasonable price. The man hardly reacted, but Decea felt hot with embarrassment, and pushed through the marketplace crowd to find someplace quiet. Her search finally took her outside of the town, to the rocky shore of the bay, where she found a nice, flat rock to sit upon before bursting into hot, frustrated tears.

Do you still imagine I'm a hero, Riene? thought Decea as she wiped her face. Then she imagined what Riene's last thoughts must have been before the sea swallowed her, and Decea's tears became body-shaking sobs. She pulled her cloak tightly around herself and cried until she fell asleep, still sitting upright.

She slept for hours there in the falling snow, as the sea lapped against the shore.



The trapper's boy awoke to a feeling like knives in his sides. He gasped, and it hurt worse. This made him cough, and that was no better.

There's a monster here, he remembered, and he tried to force himself upright through the pain. But the pain wasn't the only thing holding him back: His wrists and ankles were tightly bound together by thick rope. He could hardly move.

The boy looked around blearily, trying to get his bearings. Sunlight shone down through pine branches. How long had it been since he'd fought the beast? Where was his mother?

“Watch yourself,” said a woman’s voice. “He’s awake.”

The boy turned as best he could to see the voice’s origin. She looked like a hunter, though the boy couldn’t make out her identity under her furs. There was a man beside her, similarly covered, and holding the boy’s wood axe over one shoulder like it belonged to him. The boy snarled at these strangers and struggled against his ropes. This only reminded him of the pain in his chest, a pain that rekindled memory.

The cold. The beast. The trapper. The fire within the boy.

Had it all been a dream? But no, his axe was spattered with blood, his broken ribs denied him easy breath, and he could feel the fire building, demanding to be let out. These ropes couldn’t hold him. Nothing could, now.

The boy grinned at the strangers, and even though he was bound and lying on the ground, they each took a step back.

“He really is a demon,” breathed the woman. “Ate the woman that raised him and smiles about it.”

The fire within the boy died at her words, leaving only a hollow fear in its place. He twisted his body, ignoring the pain it brought, not to escape but to see more clearly the world around him. He saw the bloodstained snow first, and the trapper shortly after. What he saw didn’t look like a person any longer.

Ragged flesh. Exposed bone. Torn and shredded furs. Uneaten rabbits, lying to one side. A gloved hand, reaching out to the boy.

The boy screamed. It was a strangled, high-pitched sound, an inhuman howl of horror and shame. He struggled against his ropes, thoughtless and wild as an animal.

“He’s gone mad!” shouted the woman.

The man dashed forward and brought the boy’s axe down on him. It sank deep into his shoulder and stuck there. The pain was unimaginable, and it transformed the boy’s mourning howl into an instant, snarling rage. Fire poured from the boy’s breath, from the pores of his flesh. His bonds smoldered and snapped, the snow around him melted away, and the man shied back, overwhelmed by heat.

The boy stood upright, overflowing with power, teeth bared. His blood sizzled and his tears steamed away in the heat of his body. He felt no pain, no fear, only righteous anger.

But a body so broken couldn’t sustain such power. He grew light-headed and dizzy. He reached for his hip, and was confused that his axe wasn’t there, until he remembered it was in his shoulder. He reached for it there and found himself falling forward, flames trailing behind him until he met the ground face-first. After a few moments, his heat died, and he was just the boy, bleeding in the cold, consciousness fading.

“Sure enough, a devil like this would bring evil upon a town,” said the man to the woman. “Fortunately, a body in my line of work comes prepared. Help me clap my irons upon him, and let’s see him burn through those.”

The boy thought that it would make sense to die, but he didn't.



Decea awoke, famished but clear-headed. Her father had taught her that dream-spirits came to those in slumber and carried off a measure of their cares, and Decea had always thought there was wisdom in that. She was not any closer to solving her problems, but finding solutions no longer seemed so daunting.

Decea began by opening her oiled-canvas satchel and pulling out a hemlock-wood box with a silver latch. Within it were several dozen compartments holding crushed powders, dried leaves, and vials with various liquids, all carefully organized. She had been cautious with their use — she didn't have the skills or the means to replace them — but it was late in the afternoon and she couldn't afford to be distracted by hunger. She took out and chewed a single leaf of sweetbane, grown in the jungles of Creation's western isles, to curb her appetite for an hour or so.

As she chewed, Decea thought through what she'd learned. A town known for its faithful ancestor worship had no ghosts present and was burning bodies rather than laying them to rest respectfully. Trade still took place with outsiders during the day, so the problem didn't seem to be a literal plague. The townsfolk were distrustful, but Decea could probably sell her services as a doctor or apothecary to a merchant caravan on its way out of town. There was some risk of discovery in involving herself with a caravan, of course, but now that she'd gotten some sleep, those risks seemed more manageable, even if she had to reveal she was a Dragon-Blood. Anything was better than staying in a place that would be calling for an exorcist soon, if they hadn't already.

Decea's mind was set. She'd go with the first merchant willing to take her south. Or, really, anywhere but Elknell.

The clouds had cleared, and the snow had stopped as Decea slept, and she could see the sun drifting down from its apex as she walked back into town. The people of Elknell worked hard to finish up the day's work while daylight remained. Hawkers shouted, fishers offered deals to sell off their remaining catch, and townsfolk tested wares brought from distant lands. Decea looked for signs of merchants willing to hire someone, though in truth she had so little experience with the marketplace that she didn't know what to look for aside from simple wealth.

Shouts distracted Decea from her search. Townsfolk and outsiders alike gathered on the road, and Decea couldn't help her curiosity at their jeers. She peeked between shoulders and eventually hopped lightly up onto a hitching post to see better, hoping that nobody was looking her way.

A man and a woman rode through the marketplace on shaggy horses — Decea didn't know much about horse breeds — dragging a young man behind them. He was one of the beastfolk, she thought, covered in gray fur and dried blood, with a wood axe still lodged in his body. Decea had only seen beastfolk in illustrations, and hardly had a clear look at one now, but she was fascinated. Decea wanted to ask the townsfolk who the boy was and what he had done to deserve such ill treatment,

but she dared not get involved. Instead, she called upon the wind to carry voices to her as the townsfolk spoke among themselves.

“I knew the trapper’s boy was cursed, but I never imagined he looked like this.”

“Eira and the foreign bounty hunter say he ate his own mother and burns with the fires of hell. See the scorched rope on his wrists?”

“We should never have let a demon like him live, let alone so near us. No mystery why our ancestors look away from us in shame.”

Decea watched the bounty hunter and the woman — Eira — drag the boy away from the marketplace. It was tragic, thought Decea, and unfair. The superstitious Elknellfolk had probably assumed the worst of an outsider out of ignorance, and Decea had some idea of how that felt. In her sympathy toward him she found herself skeptical of his outrageous crime and supposed unnatural power. Even if he were guilty, she thought, his death wouldn’t solve the town’s problems. Once the Elknellfolk realized that, their fear and anger would continue to grow. As her aunt Vathys used to say, mortals who tasted blood rarely hesitated to draw it a second time.

Just before the beastfolk boy was dragged out of sight, Decea saw him move. It was a brief tug on his bonds, but she was sure. Certainly, some corpses twitched as their lower souls rebelled against mistreatment, but rarely in broad daylight. She thought he might still be alive. Dragged through the cold, with an axe embedded in him, for what looked like hours, and still alive?

He might be a demon after all, thought Decea. Or he might be like me.

There was a part of Decea that wanted to help Elknell, of course, and a part that wanted to help this boy on the edge of death. There was a part of her that wanted to set the dead to rest and to heal the living, to use skills she’d honed most of her life. And there was a part of her that would not be satisfied with a mystery unsolved, a question unanswered. The part of her that was afraid to get involved was still present, of course, but it was outmatched for now.

Decea set the fearful part of her aside and felt calm. She was a Dragon-Blooded sorcerer of the Wanasaan, Creation’s preeminent exorcists. And though she’d fled her clan — though she believed in her heart that they hunted and hated her even now — they were not yet here in Elknell. Why had she fled them at all, if not to live her own life?

Decea slipped away from the crowd of mortals. If Elknell’s ancestors were silent and unable to give answers to her questions, Decea would seek out those living Elknellfolk who were closest to the dead.



chapter two

A Secret Alliance

The old ways have many variations, for history is long, and it all lingers somewhere in the Underworld. Ghosts have many strange masters and obey many occult strictures, and their bindings filter through to the living world as traditions of ancestor worship. Closer to the center of Creation, these traditions have been burned away by the glorious religious philosophies of the Dragon-Blooded Dynasty — what use could Creation have for mere ancestral wisdom when the Exalted live for many generations and require no worship, only obedience? But on the Whispering Coast, which had little that Dynasts wanted, the old ways lingered on.

One such tradition is the Wise Twain, a position of spiritual authority held by a married couple, often instead of a mayor or burgomaster. The Wise Twain advise the living and interpret for the dead, and they are trusted by both, for they take dire vows to accept no family, personal wealth, or worship, even in death. Some such couples take concoctions that render them unable to conceive children, while many others are naturally childless, or have survived any children they once had. The Wise Twain in Elknell were the latter.

Though Decea had never been to the home of Elknell's Wise Twain, she recognized the signs of such a place. Dreamcatchers dangled from its eaves, and empty bowls were set by the door, that grateful and conscientious townsfolk might leave food offerings in gratitude for the couple's guidance. Decea knocked in the traditional way upon the door and waited to be received. She didn't need to wait very long before the door opened, and she stepped within.

The small home was filled with the scent of liniments and sweet-smelling smoke from the hearth. Occult tools littered the place, each unique and each given its own place of respect. Decea suspected the Wise Twain had a box of salt hidden somewhere in the home, for ghosts recoiled at its touch, and anyone wise in the ways of the dead would know to take precautions.

The Twain themselves were a pair of men, weathered, gray, and ashen-skinned. One was sturdy, built for heavy work despite his age, while the other was sickly, frail, and wrapped in blankets. They welcomed Decea, then waited for her to introduce herself.

Decea hesitated. How could she not? But they would have no reason to be honest with her if she weren't honest with them. She lowered her hood, revealing

her dark-skinned face, her ice-blue eyes, and her long hair, white as bone. Decea's face wasn't naturally kind or gentle, but her father had said it was an honest one, and Decea liked to believe that.

"Thank you for seeing me. I am Decea, a visitor. A...shipwreck survivor. I am here to offer my services to Elknell."

"I am Ake," said the hardier man, "and this is Udom. What services do you offer, child?"

"She may be no child, Ake," said Udom. "See how the smoke swirls around her. Feel the chill in the air. We play host to a spirit, perhaps, or the child of one."

Decea smiled, self-conscious. "I carry the blessings of the Elemental Dragon of Air, honored elders, and you are...very perceptive to see so immediately." Udom simply nodded, then gestured for her to answer Ake's question. Decea cleared her throat and continued, uncertainly. "I-I am...I was one of the Wanasaan. I came here, years ago, when your town called for us. I accompanied my aunt, who exorcised an unruly poltergeist at your request."

Ake leaned away slightly. "...I am surprised, Decea of the Wanasaan. This is not how the Wanasaan come to us, or how they speak. The Wanasaan come only when called. They arrive with the night fog, and they wear masks so none may know them."

"Which is why I do not claim to speak for them," said Decea. "I have left their number, for reasons I won't share, and I have left my mask behind. But I bear the skills they taught me, and some I taught myself. I need money, and I believe you need an exorcist."

Ake frowned. "We have heard the Wanasaan are jealous and cruel. If you have betrayed them, and they find out you have spoken to us, they may never come when called again. Worse, they may curse us, so we might find no peace in death."

Decea took a breath and let it out. With it, she let out her guilt and hesitation. She needed to be cold. "I'm putting you at risk," she agreed, "but you're already at risk, aren't you? The dead are killing your people at night, and your ancestors aren't helping. Have you told the people why that is?"

Ake cleared his throat. "You are a stranger, Decea. You should leave."

"I will not." Decea leaned forward and jabbed her finger toward one old man, and then toward the other. "I can just guess what you've told them. Their faith is weak. Their worship is dissatisfying. If they tighten their belts, their ancestors will speak with them again. But their ancestors aren't here. Ghosts have abandoned this town."

"They would never," said Ake, drawing himself up and thrusting out his barrel chest.

"Oh, you can see ghosts, can you?" asked Decea, grinning insolently. "Because I can, and I don't see any here. All I see is a town eager to murder a beastfolk boy to ease its fears, and two old men willing to let it happen."

When Decea saw anger bloom on Ake's face, she realized she had been too cutting. Fortunately, Udom was calmer than them both. He placed a gentle hand on Ake's forearm, and the bigger man took a breath.

"We cannot interpret for the dead when the dead do not speak," said Udom, his voice like a sigh. "We have called for the Wanasaan. We have placed a precious sacrifice in the beacon fire and spoken the words that summon them. We have readied the town coffers to pay any price they demand. But they have not come. Only you have come."

Ake looked away, as if seeing something distant. Decea decided not to ask what they sacrificed to call her clan. Instead, she said, "They don't need to know I was here, Udom. Tell me what's happening. Maybe I can help, subtly. Provide me with a room and supplies while I'm here, and once I've solved the problem, you can pay me enough silver to leave and never come back. I assure you I'll cost less than the Wanasaan would demand."

Udom's and Ake's eyes met for a moment. Ake sighed and nodded. "The dead walk at night. Corpses roam across the countryside, calling out for prey. They hide during the day. And, as you said, our ancestors have gone quiet. They told us of something terrible, some creature that was hunting them. I fear they have all fled."

Decea considered this. Hungry ghosts generally sheltered in their bodies during the day, then either patrolled the nearby area invisibly, or hunted for warm blood at night. Why were they dragging their corpses around? And how did it relate to the missing ancestors? "And the beastfolk boy?" she asked.

"He was brought by the trapper, as a child," said Udom. "An exile from some Icewalker nomad tribe. She kept the boy's features hidden. The people feared him, but he stayed quiet."

"Until today," added Ake. "There is a bounty hunter from the East, Nils. He says he has been clearing out the unquiet dead in neighboring towns for months. And he says the boy killed and ate his own mother."

"Have you seen her remains?" asked Decea. "Did this bounty hunter witness the murder himself?"

"He found the boy by the savaged remains. They are to be burned before nightfall," said Ake.

"If you want me to help this town, you will let me look at that body and speak to that boy." Decea stood. "We have perhaps an hour before the sun sets, so you must let me act quickly."

"We have not agreed to hire you," said Ake. "The Wanasaan—"

"The Wanasaan are jealous and cruel, it's true," Decea snapped. "I should know; I was one of them, raised to be like them." She leaned forward and allowed some of the chill within her to escape from her words. Smoke billowed away from her, and the house grew cold. "But I am here, and they are not."

None present knew if her words carried more threat or kindness. But they held enough of both for the Wise Twain to agree to her terms, and that was good enough for Decea.



In a town like Elknell, a jail is a rarely needed thing. The stocks do well enough for most criminals, and the bonfire does for others. But sometimes a crime is too minor, or the weather too cruel, or the criminal too upsetting for the people to look upon. Sometimes, something rare needs to be kept secure, whether for its own safety or for others', and an iron cage is required. The trapper's boy was something rare. If he could burn up ropes, he could burn through the stocks...and he might fear neither bonfire nor cold.

Elknell's jail was a cold iron cage within a squarish, mud-brick building, guarded by hardy youths and ringed with salt. They were suspicious of Decea, but she spoke their names, given by the Wise Twain, and they let her in. It seemed unthinkable that even a stranger would falsely claim the blessings of the Wise Twain, were she human. And if she were a ghost, or a shapeshifting stranger from the fae lands, then salt and iron would deter her better than a pair of mortals could.

The jailhouse held several braziers, each lit and smelling of pine resin, filling the building with oppressive heat. The young guards gave Decea a warning before they closed the door behind her: The caged beast had flung curses at them with inauspicious gestures, and he would surely curse her, too, if she dared give her name.

Once the oaken door was shut, Decea turned to the cage and said, "Hello. I'm Decea."

The beast boy was bloody and withdrawn, curled up in one corner of the cage. His hood was up, and his face was buried against his knees. His breath was labored, too irregular for him to be asleep. But he didn't speak, and he didn't throw any curses at her. He didn't respond at all.

A part of Decea saw a wounded animal and wanted to free him immediately. Another, colder part of her remembered that wounded animals were dangerous, and that sometimes shapeshifters played cruel tricks on human hearts. Decea knelt between the door and the cage, more than an arm's length from either.

"You don't know me, and I think that nobody here really knows you," she continued. "Nobody except your mother, who's dead now."

The boy stiffened. *How do normal people talk about the dead?* wondered Decea. Since she didn't know the answer, she kept on as she was used to: professionally.

"I'm an...expert?...on the dead. On ghosts and the Underworld. And I've been around long enough to know that when the dead don't do what they should, people who aren't experts get desperate. They stop thinking. They just want some way to fix the problem. And if they can't find that, they'll find someone to blame."

The boy said nothing. Decea wasn't even sure he'd heard her.

She continued: "It makes me wonder whether you really killed your mother. I think...she was maybe the only person that's been kind to you your whole life. The only woman who didn't fear or hate you. Am I right?"

The boy raised a hand, and it was missing a glove. Blood matted the fur on the back of his hand, making it look rust-colored. He made a cutting gesture, then opened his hand, then closed it tight into a fist before drawing the fist back to his chest.

Decea didn't know as much about sorcery as her aunt, or even some of her cousins. But she knew enough to recognize what wasn't sorcery. That had been no curse. It was speech.

What Decea knew better than perhaps even her aunt were languages. The Wanasaan encouraged all of their youths to master at least two languages, to aid in negotiations and funereal rituals, and Decea had mastered three before the Air Dragon chose her in her early womanhood. Words and thoughts, the parents of language, were both expressions of the element of Air. Decea had yet to find a cipher or language she could not comprehend, given enough time and study.

Decea had no time to study. Nightfall was soon approaching. So she wracked her memory and focused the power in her blood to make her thoughts work quickly. She mentally reviewed a half-dozen parent languages and alphabets, and her thoughts spread across their symbols like forked lightning. The brazier flames leaned toward Decea as her power drew the air in the jailhouse to her, but she needed only enough power to fuel a moment of genius and a single educated guess:

“What makes you say her death was your fault?”

The boy looked up and met Decea's eyes, giving her a clear look at his face.

The boy looked only slightly like anyone else his age, for his face was elongated, with a snout rather than a true nose. Thin, gray fur adorned his face, and transitioned into shaggy, red-tipped fur spilling from his scalp and neck. Sharp teeth jutted from a mouth that looked ill-suited to human speech. He reminded Decea of a wolfhound, but he truly wasn't quite man or beast.

She thought, however, that she saw a human glimmer of hope in his eyes. She imagined it was a human hope to be understood, or to see justice done. But despite the gifts the Elemental Dragon of Air had given Decea, she had no power to see thoughts.

“Did I read you correctly?” she asked. “I've done some study of the Icewalker tribes' spirit-calling language, and I took some inspiration from Realm legionnaires' hand-talk...”

The boy nodded, and made to stand, but pain drew him up short. He dragged himself closer to her regardless, making rapid gestures with his free hand.

“Slow down,” said Decea. “I'm still learning. I can't fully follow your signs yet.” Without meaning to, she found herself crawling closer to the cage. “But if you'll tell me what happened, I'll try to understand.”

The boy was unused to expressing relief with his face, but the first gesture he taught Decea was *Thank you*.



The boy was not a storyteller, and translation difficulties made the hooded woman — who introduced herself as Decea — a difficult audience, but he told her of the cold and the storm, of the dead and the night, of the beast and the fight.

As he shared his story, Decea lowered her hood. The boy was no more a judge of age and wisdom than he was a storyteller, but he thought she might be in her twenties. She did not look quite like anyone he had met in his life, and she did not speak to him as anyone else ever had. She asked a lot of questions, which the boy was definitely not used to. It wasn't a bad feeling, though at times it was frustrating or even intimidating. Her eyes never looked away from him, and that was the least familiar feeling of all.

As Decea saw a need to act quickly, and the boy wasn't used to lengthy communication anyway, they soon settled on a routine where he responded to her questions with simple gestures, especially *yes* and *no*. She asked strange questions about the beast (“Was it furred? Did it have scales, too? Was it made of some stranger material, like wood or snow?”), about the behavior of the dead (“Do they resemble corpses or living folk?”), and about whether the boy had trespassed upon any graves (the answer was “no”). And she asked about the fire.

The boy didn't really know what to say about the fire. Injured, caged, and hungry as he was, it burned low inside him, but it still burned. And he had no reason to doubt what the Elknellfolk had said about that flame. He had no reason to doubt he was a demon or monster. It was, he thought, a cause for shame. But the boy had lived with shame all his life, and when Decea asked to see the fire, he didn't mind. At least fire was beautiful.

The boy began by creating a spark at his fingertips, a tiny part of the heat within him. Here in the cell, away from danger, he was able to fully appreciate the experience. It was like throwing stones into a pond or howling in an echoing canyon. That small spark said to the world that the boy was here, and real, and powerful. He wanted to make more, and Decea's attention only encouraged him.

So the boy let more of the fire out, and he breathed heat into the already-oppressive jailhouse. Flames licked along his fur, his eyes glinted a deep orange, and where he touched the iron bars, they grew warm, and then hot. But the boy himself did not burn or scald at the hot iron's touch, and neither did his clothes.

“...good,” said Decea, after a few moments. “Now stop.”

But the boy didn't hear her. It was better to be a raging fire than a wounded boy with a dead mother. He let out more and more heat, and the flames swirled around him. Soon, the very air would ignite around him.

Decea reached between the hot iron bars, grimacing at the heat, and placed a finger upon the boy's forehead. She unleashed a measure of her own power with that touch, and it was like an icy wind upon the boy. He recoiled, surprised, but clearer-headed.

“I’m like you,” said Decea. “I remember how it feels, to be young and full of the Elemental Dragons’ power. But if you keep going, you’ll set fire to the jailhouse and frighten the mortal townsfolk even more.”

The boy wasn’t certain he cared about frightening townsfolk any longer...but he had been raised to respect experience, and never to harm a man or woman except to protect himself. He certainly didn’t want to roast the only living person in Creation that had bothered to learn anything about him. He took a cooling breath, closed his eyes, and sat still. Heat and light still rose from him, but he felt they would fade, given patience.

After she was satisfied the boy had controlled himself, Decea settled herself on the floor as well and spoke: “The Wise Twain have hired me to deal with the dead. I don’t yet know if this beast is related to the problem, but I know you aren’t. Perhaps you can help me find out the truth.”

The boy opened his eyes, still bright with inner fire. He touched his chest. *Me?*

Decea nodded. “I have no skill as a hunter or tracker, and little as a warrior. Once, I had my family to keep me safe and make up for my shortcomings. Now, I will need help, and fire has its uses.”

The boy looked away. He had never been asked for help before, except by his mother.

Decea’s offer took on a pleading tone. “I can teach you more about your gifts, and of course I’ll share my profits with you. Perhaps...one third to you?”

The boy found the education promising, and the profits irrelevant. But he signed to her his greatest concern: *My mother.*

Decea nodded slowly. “You want to be present when I examine her body?”

The boy shook his head emphatically. He could not imagine it, did not want to imagine what such an examination might look like. He signed to her, as simply and clearly as he could: *I need to kill the beast.*

Decea let out a long breath. “...very well. It’s a deal. I’ll teach you more about your gifts, and if we find the beast, I’ll help you get your vengeance.”

The boy thought it over and nodded.

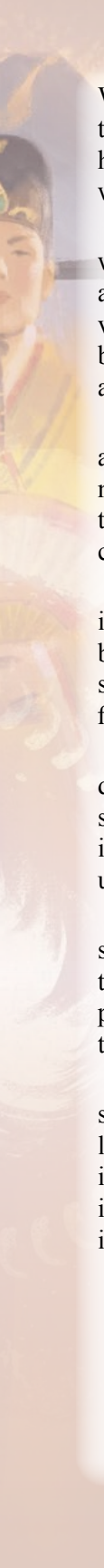
“What’s your name?” asked Decea.

The boy spelled out his name, then gestured to his gray fur, but Decea didn’t understand either. So the boy twisted his mouth to speak the one word he’d practiced more than any other. It came out somewhere between a growl and a high-pitched cry, but it was clear enough: “Gray.”

Decea held her hand out through the bars once more, this time to shake the boy’s hand. “It’s a deal, Gray,” she said. He took her hand and marveled at how cold it was even in this sweltering jailhouse.



The sun had met the horizon by the time Decea left the jailhouse. She wasn’t sure if she’d be able to get Gray released that night, but she planned to convince the



Wise Twain to at least give him some food to eat and furs to sleep on. Comforts like these would help him heal, after all, and he wasn't going to be much good to her if he wasn't allowed to heal. If the Wise Twain were smart — and Decea thought they were — they'd understand the value in treating a Dragon-Blood kindly, regardless.

Decea made her way to the town's central beacon fire. Most folk in the town were busy preparing for nightfall and paid her no mind. She made sure to reserve a room and meal at the longhouse while the sun still shone, using some of the silver the Wise Twain had given her as an advance. Then she rushed to see the body before it burned. She wasn't the only one; the trapper had made friends in Elkneel, and a few mortals had brought ales to better see her off.

Ideally, Decea would have been able to examine the corpse personally, and alone, and observe how it reacted to a few tinctures and powders from her bag. But not only did she have no time to prepare those tests, Elkneel was far too frightened to let a corpse out of sight with a stranger. Especially a stranger who was not officially an exorcist.

So Decea simply watched closely as several strong men and women — including the woman who'd helped capture Gray — lifted the trapper, still wearing her bloody furs. They were careful to keep the corpse in sunlight, to keep the lingering soul docile as it burned. And docile it stayed, even as the body was heaved into the fire, spraying a cloud of sparks into the air.

Most mortals failed to realize that hungry ghosts didn't especially fear fire. Fire destroyed the body that was a hungry ghost's daytime home, but sometimes they slipped away in shadow, and found some lightless hole to shelter in. When burned in daylight, they often attempted escape only to boil away under the sun's glare, unseen by all but Decea.

Today, in the late afternoon sunlight, no lower soul arose from its home. Instead, as the flames took hold upon the body, it jerked and spasmed, striving in vain to escape fire and sunlight all at once. Those who had placed it upon the fire used pitchforks to hold it in place, long after the skin blackened, split, and smoked, until the spasms finally ceased.

It was an unsettling sight, even to Decea, and the townsfolk's subdued reaction said it was a common one for them. But to them it was another element of a plague laid upon the land and its struggling people. To Decea, it was a disturbing piece of information to turn over in her mind: Either the trapper's hungry ghost was trapped in its corpse, unable to escape even as the body burned, or there was no ghost left in the body at all, in which case...what caused it to move?



chapter three

The Hunting Party

Decea had been taught as a child that the reason to earn trust was to spend it on something important. The Wise Twain did not share that view, and refused to lie to the Elknellfolk, regardless of the stakes. The couple was, however, comfortable announcing their trust in the visitor who had proven the trapper's son's innocence, and who planned to stage a hunt for the beast that had truly killed the trapper. Decea had certainly never staged a hunt like this before, but Ake had, in his youth. He advised her to choose a place to meet in a day's time, and to pay the town crier to announce it. He warned her, as well, that the hunt might just be her and Gray, for Elknell was wary of strangers and exhausted by nightly fear of the dead.

The trust of the Wise Twain convinced the townsfolk to provide Decea with some wary cooperation, at least enough for her to get a good night's rest. Decea also spent some of her silver on a hooded, rabbit-fur coat and some of her time on learning. She asked around, trying to learn who had been attacked by a beast like the one Gray described, or who had shown injuries that could be related. As she did so, she expressed interest in the dead, for they were "an important risk to consider" on her hunt.

Decea also visited Gray. The townsfolk had not quite trusted him enough to let him stay anywhere in town but the jail, and they hadn't given back the axe they'd pulled from his shoulder, but they no longer locked his cell. He had been fed and even provided new clothes, which fit him poorly and which he resented. He was used to spending days indoors when the weather demanded it, but he always had busywork or his mother's company before, and he had never had a fire within him demanding to be unleashed. He was restless and wouldn't allow his ribs a chance to heal.

So Decea stayed with Gray for several hours in the jailhouse. She set his ribs in place and held them still with unforgiving leather bindings. She spent more of her herbal reserves to mix an ointment that would speed his healing if he applied it regularly despite the odd smell. As he rested, she peppered him with questions about his sign language, learning its subtleties with speed that would have astonished him if he'd ever tried to teach anyone before. As it was, he quickly grew bored and frustrated with teaching, and invited her to make good on her promise to teach him instead.

"We are Dragon-Blooded, the Exalted of the Five Elemental Dragons," said Decea, mimicking the storytelling tone her father had used with her decades ago. "The Elemental Dragons of Air, Water, Fire, Wood, and Earth, who live at the poles

of the five Directions of Creation. Their blessing flows in our veins and is passed from parent to child. Near the pole of Air, here in the Northern edge of Creation, the blood of the Dragons flows thin, and Exaltation strikes families as haphazardly as lightning does a forest. In the distant Realm, where great Dragon-Blooded clans rule the lands around the central pole of Earth, they say the Dragons' blood flows thick enough to Exalt every child in a generation."

My mother told me of the Exalted, signed Gray. But what can we do?

"We are the Chosen, who bear the power of the elements within us. You bear an Aspect of Fire — I can see its markings in the color of your eyes and the tips of your fur — and so you will more easily master the gifts of fire, such as passion, speed, and force. But all five elements are yours to command, as they are mine. I bear the Aspect of Air, and the Air Dragon's cleverness, clarity, and subtlety come naturally to me. We must hone our gifts, though, as any mortal must practice their craft, in order to master them."

Why do you call them that? Mortals? Are we like spirits? Gray couldn't identify why that made him feel uncomfortable.

Decea seriously considered the question. "We aren't quite like spirits; we do age, eventually. But we are long-lived, Gray, and hardier. Your injuries might have permanently disabled or even killed a mortal, but you'll heal from them within a week without my help, and much sooner if you obey me, rest, and apply your ointment daily."

Gray grasped Decea's unsubtle recommendation, but he had a pressing question to ask: *Are these gifts why I'm different from everyone else?*

"...you're the first like you that I've met, Gray, but you're not all alone." Decea took a bite of the smoked fish she'd brought to share with Gray, as she recalled her studies back on the island where she was born. "Scholars call you one of the beastfolk: people with a bit of animal mixed in. They say that some beastfolk are conceived through trysts between spirits and people, or made through contamin — er, alteration by exposure to the Wyld places where the Fair Folk hunt. Some are created as warriors in service to the moon-mad Anathema warlords, who wage their endless war against the Realm. And some... Well. Did your mother ever tell you who your father was?"

Gray looked away. *She said she would tell me when I was a man,* he signed.

Decea decided not to say, "she still may." Gray seemed touchy about the subject of his mother's death and hadn't shown any interest in ancestor worship. Instead Decea said, "My father said some are born with a beast's soul, and quest into the Wyld for a way to claim the body that fits them best. Perhaps your father was one of those."

Gray said nothing and continued to look away. Decea felt that Gray was done talking. Between them, they let the conversation die for the day.



Afternoon, evening, and night passed, and Decea learned a great deal about hunting supplies from Ake and Gray. Decea and Gray agreed that the volunteer hunters could meet at the trapper's cabin, a mile's walk from Elknell's edge. Snow sat firmly upon the earth, glittering in the morning sunlight and crunching beneath the Exalts' feet.

Gray told Decea to wait outside the cabin when they arrived, and though she was curious — might the trapper's fetters to home and son have allowed her to cling to the cabin as a spirit? — Decea respected his request as he went inside. He came back out after a short time, with better-fitting seal-leather pants, a reindeer-hide coat and hat, and the long-handled wood axe that Elknell had finally returned to him. The cabin had no iron lock on the door, like Decea had seen in her own home growing up, but she suspected the trapper's cabin was protected in other ways.

Gray didn't say anything about what he saw or felt in the cabin. He only looked at the sun with impatience, as they had planned to wait until noon for other hunters to arrive.

The first volunteer was Ake himself, one of the Wise Twain. He carried a strong-looking bow, and made no complaint at the cold wind, though it made him shiver.

"I didn't think you hunted any longer," said Decea.

"I have always loved it," said Ake, "but I haven't needed to in many years. Today, I think I need to."

The second and only other volunteer was Eira, the hunter who had helped capture Gray two days before. She was a mature woman, with dusky skin marked by sun and scars, and russet hair tinged with silver. She had a short bow at her shoulder and carried a spear.

Gray suppressed a growl at the sight of her, and Eira didn't flinch away. Instead, she walked up to him, bowed her head, and said, "Owe you a debt, boy."

She was Elknell-born, and the old ways ran thick in her blood. Gray didn't expect an apology and wouldn't have known what to do with one if he got it, but his mother had taught him about debt: Don't be cruel to those who owe you, and don't forgive their debts. Those with honor want no forgiveness, and those without honor deserve no forgiveness.

Gray thought it over and nodded, and that was that. They waited until noon and set off into the nearby woods.



Gray was the most familiar with the woods near his mother's cabin, but his memories of the attack were unclear. He and his mother had been on their way home, but the journey was a long, stressful blur of confused landmarks, dim light, and concealing weather. Eira knew exactly where she and the bounty hunter, Nils, had found Gray, so she led the way.

Gray and the Elknellfolk were comfortable traveling in silence, but that was a challenge for Decea. She found herself asking about the land, about herbs she'd heard could be found in the area, and about the hunters' experiences. She asked questions about trapping, and about dangerous local fauna, and in her questioning revealed things she hadn't meant to.

"Not much for the outdoors, are you, girl?" asked Eira.

Decea coughed. "I suppose not. I've read more than I've experienced."

"Odd choice to lead a hunt."

Ake cut in, "She's an investigator, Eira. One with knowledge and spiritual gifts we'll need."

Eira glanced at Gray. "Gifts like this one's unnatural fire?"

Gray grinned at her.

"His name is Gray," said Decea. "And his fire's beautiful."

Nobody present seemed to know how to respond to that. Decea was glad for her hood, as it concealed her embarrassment. She hung back and followed the hunters.

After a time, Gray hung back to accompany her. When she looked his way, he asked, *How do you know these things? About me, the dead, the Exalted?*

Decea's first thought was that she could reveal nothing to him, but...well, who would think to ask Gray? Who would even understand him? The tribes who might understand Gray's sign language were far away and disinterested in Decea's personal history. The mortal Elknellfolk might one day trust him enough to learn his signs, but by then she should be long gone from the town. She doubted he could read or write.

Perhaps, thought Decea, she had found someone she could trust with her secrets. Someone with no choice but to keep them.

Decea weaved signs and spoken words together, taking corrections from Gray and learning even as she told her story. An observer who didn't know or see the signs would have difficulty following their conversation, and so would someone who watched them but could not hear. The story went like this:

"In a place further northwest from here, where the land freezes into true ice and icebergs block the waterways, my clan lives on our Silent Isle. We are called the Wanasaan, and we are speakers to — and executioners of — the dead. Wherever the hungry dead hunt, wherever forlorn specters lure the living to join them, wherever ancestors grow bloated upon offerings extorted from starving descendants, we are called. The Dragon-Blooded among us travel to those places that call us, using sorcery to find our way, and to announce our presence with a quieting fog."

What is sorcery? asked Gray. *Is it like the magic my mother would speak of, to commune with spirits and guide the growth of the land?*

"There are many subtle forms of magic," said Decea, "but sorcery is the stuff of miracles. It grabs the invisible Essence all around us and twists it until the world

is reshaped. Sorcery is taxing on the mind, and mastering it reshapes the sorcerer as well. Few Exalted have the knack for it, and fewer mortals still. But it is key to the success of the Wanasaan.”

How did you learn it? From books?

“There’s an ever-freezing spring upon the Silent Isle. To speak of it...to speak of it away from the Isle is forbidden. It’s a cold and hungry place, shrouded in fog, demanding to feed on the souls of the dead. And if you drown in it, its hunger consumes you. Or, if fortune favors you, it lets you return, carrying a shard of its hungry cold in your soul.”

You drowned and came back to life?

“It’s what the way of the Wanasaan demands for every Dragon-Blood, on the dawn of their twenty-fifth year. Some of us don’t return.”

I wouldn’t do that.

“I wasn’t asked.”

I would leave if they made me do it. Is that why you left?

“That...is an interesting question, Gray,” said Decea. She was breathing heavily, and it wasn’t just from hiking through the snow. She had said too much, and she felt as if her aunt were looking over her shoulder. “I’d like to focus on the hunt now. Tell me what we should be looking for.”

Gray signed to Decea about the signs of an animal’s passage, of behaviors and natural paths that they would follow, and of how to read the forest. He did not go on at length, because he didn’t know how to share a brief lifetime’s worth of experience, and because Decea didn’t know many of the signs he used to communicate about the forest. But what he could teach, he taught with some joy. It felt good to be an expert, and it felt good to share things his mother had shared with him, and it felt good to have Decea’s attention. She did not make him feel like he was ugly or unfortunate.

But soon they came to the place Gray half remembered. He recalled the feeling of manacles on his wrists, of course, and the horrid smell of the beast’s breath. Eira called the party’s attention to the snow where the trapper had lain, bloody and ruined, and Gray saw it so clearly again in his mind’s eye that he had to turn away. He signed to Decea, *I must go*, and he walked off through the trees.

The party didn’t immediately ask, or chase after him, but looked to each other instead.

“If there’s really a monster out there, he might get himself killed,” said Ake.

“He’s young and inexperienced, with fire in his veins,” agreed Decea. “He may not be thinking clearly.”

“Boy couldn’t save his mother,” said Eira. “Wouldn’t be thinking clearly in his place, fire or no. Either of you able to keep up with him out here?”

Decea sighed. “...I can try. If I’m not back soon...”

“We’ll look for signs, then head back to town and see you there,” said Ake. He shooed the Exalt away. “Go find Gray.”

Decea smiled, then let the cold spring wind embrace, caress, and lift her. She leapt upward, several times her own height, and swung up onto one of the snow-blessed branches above. Gray knew the forest, but he was also a Fire Aspect. If there was trouble, Decea imagined she’d be able to spot the smoke more clearly from up here, hopping from branch to branch.



Gray’s walk became a jog, then a run, and it was perfect. He had never been so fast, or felt so much strength in his limbs, or felt his feet rise so easily from the earth. He hopped embankments and dodged looming trunks. His passage scattered nearby birds and hardly disturbed the snow on which he trod. It was pure action and satisfying focus, with no deep thought or complicated feeling required. Gray felt powerful, and for reasons he couldn’t identify, he needed to feel powerful.

A flash of bright color caught Gray’s eye against the forest’s background of green, brown, and white. Full of fire and excitement, he altered his course to meet it. He pulled his mother’s wood axe from his back and leapt into a clearing, half expecting to see a hulking beast with a ruined eye. Instead he nearly fell upon a man, bundled up but familiar, with a sword in one hand and a burning torch in the other. It was the bounty hunter, who just two days ago had clapped Gray in irons.

The bounty hunter screamed in startlement, stumbled away, and swung his sword wildly at Gray. He’d honed his reflexes over years of encounters with desperate prey, and he was nearly as fast as a mortal man could achieve.

Gray’s injuries were still healing, and he had never been in a fight with a man or woman before, let alone an experienced combatant. But he still moved faster than the bounty hunter, faster than he could think or make any kind of choice. If he’d had time to think, he might have repaid the pain of an axe in his back, but he just shoved the man away from him. The bounty hunter shouted as he stumbled back, and down, and out of sight.

Surprised, Gray leaned over to see that the man had fallen down into a hole in the forest floor. Gray hadn’t known there was a hole here at all. He still raised his axe overhead, ready to drop down and continue the fight.

The bounty hunter scrambled upright, grabbing the sword and torch he’d dropped as he fell. “Whoa, wait,” he said, “I didn’t mean any harm, I was just startled. I heard they let you out, and that’s fine. I reckon I owe you an apology.” He tried to climb out of the hole and made no progress. “Looks like you’ve got me at a disadvantage, friend. There’s a rope right by you. Hold it out for me and let me climb up.”

The bounty hunter sheathed his sword and held out his open hand unthreateningly. Gray might have felt justified killing a man that had attacked him first in the heat of battle but leaving him stuck here in the cold would just be cruel, and his mother never taught him to be cruel.

Gray lowered the rope and hauled the man up with a little more force than necessary. Once the bounty hunter found his footing, he sighed with relief and nodded to Gray.

Gray signed, *Don't call me 'friend,'* with a dismissive gesture.

"...all right," said the bounty hunter, who didn't understand the sign, but felt Gray's hostility. "Call me Nils."

Gray half turned from the bounty hunter and squatted near the hollow. He peered within for a moment (wishing that Nils would be stupid enough to try something while Gray was looking away), then back to Nils, who'd stayed in place. He pointed to Nils, then to the hollow, implying a question.

"Yeah," said Nils, "a body's got to stay busy. There's a bounty for corpses, and I reckon they could be hiding anywhere the sun don't reach."

Gray considered this. Decea thought there might be some connection between the hungry dead and the beast they sought. And...Gray didn't remember seeing this hole before. It looked like someone or something had dug it out. Like it was some sort of burrow.

It did occur to Gray that Decea wouldn't like it if he got hurt investigating corpses and monsters on his own. But he also imagined that she and the hunters would be impressed if he did all that and didn't get hurt. So he stood up, snatched the torch from Nils' hand, and jumped down into the hole.



Nils had traveled far compared to most mortals, and he had seen more than his share of wonders and terrors. His experiences had made him wary of trusting others, but they'd also made him flexible in the face of changing circumstances. Some days, a fellow earned easy silver by bringing in a beast-blooded boy that everyone wanted an excuse to be rid of anyhow. Some days, a fellow found himself on the wrong side of an aggressive Dragon-Blood. It behooved such a fellow to pay close attention to the stars, and to roll with whatever fate they dealt him.

Nils took the boy's reappearance as a sign that his hunt for the dead was done. No mortal could outdo a determined Exalt, he reckoned, and he couldn't rely on the boy showing mercy next time they met. He hurried away from the hole, toward where he'd hitched his horse a few hours before.

He didn't get far before a woman dropped out of the sky in front of him, landing with hardly a sound. She had a hood drawn low, but Nils could see her cold blue eyes inside it. She didn't make any threatening moves, but Nils drew his sword anyhow.

"I'm looking for the trapper's son," she said.

"I'd love to help you, ma'am, but I haven't seen him," said Nils.

The woman sighed and asked, "You're the foreign bounty hunter, right?" She produced a silver coin and held it out between them. "I'm looking for the trapper's son."

Nils eyed the coin. "Now that I think on it, I might be able to help you."



In Gray's limited experience, the strong smell of death was most associated with people. Animals who died in the cold didn't smell much, and healthy forest animals who died in warmer seasons didn't last long before they were picked clean. Only people kept whole bodies — human or animal — out of scavengers' reach long enough for rot to set in.

When Gray's fall slid to a halt — in the curve of a tunnel deeper than he'd expected — and he smelled death, distant but undeniable, he knew he was in the right place. The tunnel was too tight for him to swing his axe or do anything but crawl, so he crawled forward, following his nose.

In time, the tunnel merged with a larger one, and Gray realized he'd found a system under the forest. This was also when he saw the first corpse: a deer buck, bloated and fetid, drained of blood by several puncture wounds. Most predators wouldn't leave good meat lying around to rot, thought Gray, but his mother taught him the dead craved warm blood. They didn't care about the meat left behind. Maybe he'd found their trail. He kept moving, his journey punctuated by occasional flashes of sunlight from small holes above him.

Finally, he found the burrow he'd expected from the beginning. It was a rounded space, foul-smelling and free of any errant sunlight, and as he thrust the torch forward, he saw its light glint off of the glassy, unblinking eyes of the dead, tangled as if sleeping in a pile. A groan filled the burrow, and a man's rotted voice croaked out some indistinct question. Gray shut out the sound of intelligible words, because these were dead things and listening would only make him hesitate. He stepped forward and roared a challenge at the dead, and the steel head of his axe glowed red hot in the darkness.

The dead rushed toward Gray, white-eyed and babbling. He swung his axe in a vision-searing arc, and it struck open the skull of a dead woman with a crack and scalding hiss. She tumbled as more corpses clambered over her, and one young man — perhaps as young as Gray himself — reached Gray first, stabbing at him with a blood-rusted knife. Gray threw off the young man and swung his axe again, chopping into the forearm of a man who tried to grab him.

There were fewer than ten of the dead here, but they knew no fear, even of the torch, and those who fell still clung and bit and babbled. With each swing of axe or torch, with each desperate sidestep in this press of cold bodies, Gray burned more of the elemental fuel inside him. And as he let the fire out, it radiated out through his skin and clothes as red light. He saw the burrow in its entirety — a space easily large enough for dozens of bodies, a nest of bones and animal corpses — and had no time to consider it. The smell of the dead was oppressive, and he had to break free of them. He tried to leap out of the press, but the woman whose skull he had split grabbed onto his ankles, pulling him to the dirt.

Gray struggled against the pull of the dead, and he thought he heard one of them call his name. But he tuned out the noise again, for he did not intend to join them.

He brought the torch down on the hand that bound him, again and again until its grip loosened. With his other hand he struck back at each creature that swung a weapon his way, and with each success the fire inside and around him burned brighter and took on a more focused shape. His exertion matched their hunger, then exceeded it, until they could not touch him at all. Their reach met only his red-hot axe or his burning flesh, and they howled in a memory of pain or fear as he struck back at them.

One by one, the dead fell. Some sang, some cried, some called for loved ones. They all got the axe.

And then Gray stood alone, breathing heavily, wreathed in fire and pouring off enough light to fill the burrow. The flame around him had coalesced into the shape of a wolf, moving as he moved, and in their victory he and the wolf of fire howled in glorious harmony.

This, he thought, was what it meant to be Exalted.



Decea stood at the mouth of the burrow, along with the bounty hunter, Nils. Both looked on at Gray's unleashed anima in some wonder.

Decea had helped keep the dead off Gray's back with a pair of thrown knives, and Nils had dismembered a straggler or two near the edges of the fight, but once Gray had gotten going, he hadn't really needed their help. Decea had never personally known any Fire Aspects before, and now she was glad to have one as an ally. She was also glad not to have seen Gray's anger unleashed upon the people of Elknell. Perhaps they'd earned it, but Gray would have regretted it, she thought. She hoped.

As Gray's howl died, the wolf that expressed his soul faded, swirling back into formless flame around him. He looked around for more enemies and saw Decea instead. He grinned at her, and though his sharp teeth might have frightened mortals, Decea saw a young man eager for recognition.

"Well done," she said, because it was the thing she'd liked to hear most when she was young and her father was alive. "Now step away before you burn away all our evidence."

Gray looked down and around him, saw the heat blackening the corpses near him, and backed away sheepishly, still bleeding light.

Decea stepped forward and called upon the air to calm the corpse fires, and to disperse the smoke and fetid stench of this place. "Now I'll do my part," she said.



chapter four A Debt of Pain

Nils wiped sweat from his brow and congealed blood from his sword. He could hardly look at the brilliant, beast-blooded boy and could hardly breathe through the stench in this place. But his expertise had been paid for, and he intended to stay nearby without complaint. At least, until he could disappear without the Dragon-Blooded noticing. He doubted that the boy had noticed either of them on the edges of the fight until it ended, but Nils didn't think the woman missed much. She certainly hadn't missed with her knives.

Nils didn't see a need to claim any credit for his help or call the boy's attention to him at all. More sensible, he thought, to stay out of the way when Exalts were busy. Instead, he drew his sturdiest knife and got to work cutting right hands off the dead. The bounty from a few corpses was likely too small to concern the mighty Dragon-Blooded anyhow, and there was a particular sort of face he was looking for in the remains.



Decea paced the perimeter of the large burrow, taking advantage of the brilliance of Gray's anima to better investigate the area. Closer to him, the anima's heat was scorching, but reddish light extended well beyond his body, swirling and filling the burrow almost as water might. Had his anima been revealed to this extent above ground, it would have been visible for miles around. As it was, Decea merely hoped the beast that dug this burrow didn't see any light spilling out through its exit tunnels as it faded over the next hour or so.

And it had been a beast that dug out this place, she was certain. Great rents in the earth suggested curved claws, each on the ends of arms longer than a tall man stood, certainly more than a dozen corpses with simple tools could manage. The beast responsible had doubtless dug out the larger tunnels to suit its passage, while smaller tunnels served the human dead.

As for the humans themselves... fire damage complicated her estimates, but the corpses showed a range in levels of decay. Some injuries suggested bites or cuts taken while they'd still been living. Some had even had time to heal.

"Some of them were kept here alive," she said aloud, though she didn't realize it. "Perhaps they were killed one at a time. But why?"

Decea didn't look for or await a response. She instead pulled the hemlock-wood case from within her satchel, and carefully opened it up. She searched through the herbs and tinctures she had remaining, and found powdered scarcap, a mushroom that only grew in cemeteries. She sprinkled some on the open eyes of several corpses — not noticing Gray's disgust or Nils' curiosity — and stared into those blank gazes. The powder swirled and settled into patterns, unique in each filmy eye.

"The scarcap bloom is usually much more regular in corpses this fresh," she said, thinking aloud. "The soul remnants within must be very weak, unable to sustain stable form."

"What might cause such a thing?" asked Nils, knowing a woman who liked to give away information for free when he saw one.

"I'm not certain. It explains why the lower souls didn't wander free of their corpses. They're only remnants, weak wisps of soul too dependent on their corpses to protect them. I suppose it could be a plague, given that it's affected them all."

Gray made a warding sign with a gloved hand, to keep disease spirits at bay. Nils double-checked the scarf wrapped around his face, now relying on it to shield him from breathing harmful miasmas. Decea did neither, because a cursory examination of the corpses had given her a new theory. She began to run a gloved finger along each of the corpses' injuries, absently remarking on the relative raggedness of each wound as she went along.

Ash, smoke, and dust rose up around Decea as she worked, stirred by a breeze that swirled around her. The gentle but insistent gust reflected the moving power within her, as she called upon the Essence of water to detect out-of-place irregularities in the corpses' injuries and relative decay, and sent the Essence of air racing through her mind to clear the cobwebs of forgetfulness from a studious lifetime of memories. Pale blue light suffused her body, a cool contrast to Gray's own anima.

"She was the first here to die," Decea said, of a half-burned woman who'd had over thirty years of life and more than thirty days dead. "Many of the others here bear the mark of her bite. They all suffered it while they lived — see, they all show signs of healing, clotting, scarring."

Gray wanted to ask how she could tell the woman's bite from any other person's, but Decea didn't look his way. She had eyes only for the dead.

"The fresher corpses have more human bites," she continued. "Some were kept alive for days. The dead were a hive, hunting together, bringing new prey back to the nest. I'd assumed they were mindless, but this is cooperative behavior. Fascinating behavior."

"So it was a plague?" asked Nils, now holding his bag of severed hands further from his face.

"No," said Decea, "not at all. Because every corpse here shares the same killing injury: a bite too large, too sharp to have come from a human jaw. Just one." Decea's eyes moved back and forth as she talked through her theory, as if seeing things

nobody else could. “It was the beast. It killed them all, and left broken, soul-shattered remnants to serve it. No, no.”

She spoke in an elated rush as the answer became clearer in her mind. “It didn’t just kill them. It ate their souls. That’s why the corpses have no true hungry ghosts to guard them, why Elknell has no ancestors remaining. The beast doesn’t care about the living. It hunts ghosts and eats them right out of the living if it must. Then it uses the corpses to bring it more living people, until it’s hungry again.” Decea turned to Gray and grinned, expecting him to share her feeling of accomplishment, now that everything made sense.

The look Gray gave Decea knocked all elation from her. Was it sickness, or sadness, or fear? Was it hatred? Decea looked away, reminded that she was a cold, alien woman from a cold, alien family. Everyone mourns but the Wanasaan, her aunt had often said.

“...if it used the dead to help it hunt,” Nils reasoned, “then this is the beast’s lair? We should be going.”

Decea took a moment to consider this, then shook her head. “It was, but the freshest human corpse has been dead a week. These animal corpses scattered around, many are more recent. Like the hive was left to fend for itself. The beast may have other lairs. Unless you killed it?” she asked Gray.

Gray shook his head. He signed, *I took its eye. Maybe I frightened it away?*

“Perhaps,” said Decea. “Perhaps it had already planned to leave soon. It already devoured or frightened off Elknell’s ghosts. It might resort to hunting the living when easier prey can’t be found.”

Nils asked, “And how might a beast big enough to take such large bites out of folks hunt ghosts who, er, ‘lived’ in Elknell without being seen by any but this one?” and gestured to Gray.

“Because most ancestors don’t ‘live’ in Creation at all,” responded Decea confidently. “They reside in the Underworld and reach out to those who make prayers and offerings to them.”

Gray signed an unfamiliar term to Decea, which she read as *The land between day and night*.

“A shadowland,” she agreed. Shadowlands were places where Creation and the Underworld crossed over, and where a person could cross from one realm to the next without dying — ideally. Shadowlands often arose where great numbers of people died, and many were vicious and haunted places. “There must be a shadowland somewhere nearby. A creature that preys on the living and the dead alike may even call such a place home.”

“I suppose Elknell’s stars are changing, then,” said Nils. “If that monster’s moved on, maybe the dead will settle down. Townsfolk’ll be happy to hear it.”

Decea picked at her lip with one finger. The bounty hunter lacked perspective. Even if the beast had left for good — and it might not have — the Elknellfolk

would be horrified to learn that their treasured ancestors had all been devoured or chased off. The whole town's traditions would be shaken, even shattered by an event like that. And besides...

Decea looked at Gray. The light around him had died down considerably, and the heat pouring from his body had grown less deadly, but the anger in his eyes burned fiercely. He wasn't on this hunt for Elknell. Either the beast would die, or Gray would.

Decea stopped fidgeting and flashed Nils her best charming smile and another silver coin. "Nils, what would you say to doing more work for me? I could use another hunter who knows how to keep secrets."

Nils looked at Decea, then at Gray, who didn't smile at all. The bounty hunter nodded to Decea and said, with apparent sincerity, "I'd like that."



They piled and burned the remains to be safe and made their way back to the surface. By that time, Gray's anima burned no more brightly than a lively campfire, and Decea's anima had faded from view entirely. Decea insisted they accompany Nils so he could get his horse, for which Nils thanked her profusely. Decea and Gray signed to each other as they followed the bounty hunter.

I don't like this, signed Gray. I don't trust him. We don't need him.

I understand him, replied Decea. I was raised by people like him. He's quick-thinking and useful, and he'll do whatever allows him to reliably profit. We can trust him as long as he's convinced it's more profitable than dangerous to work for us. If we cut him loose, he'll sell the truth to the townsfolk and we don't know quite how they'll react.

He can't betray us if we kill him, signed Gray. Decea didn't react, and Gray growled to himself. He called me a devil and locked me up, he added.

It took Decea a while to respond, and when she did, it was quick and decisive: *We're hunting a creature that feeds on ghosts, but all the ghosts have fled. We may need live bait, and animals don't have souls.*

Gray stumbled to a halt, but Decea kept walking. Gray looked at her, eyes wide, for a time before jogging to catch up with her. Neither of them discussed the issue further.



It was mid-afternoon when Decea, Gray, and Nils found Ake and Eira. Eira gave the bounty hunter a surprised, respectful nod, and pointed to Gray's ash-smudged coat. "Found something, did you?"

"A hive of the restless dead," said Decea. She didn't see a need to explain that Gray had destroyed them; Gray's pride was obvious enough. Instead, she explained what she'd deduced about the beast and the dead who served it, then said, "I don't know this region well, though. Are there any shadowlands nearby?"

Ake rubbed his stubbled jaw. “I know of none within a day’s journey, even if we had horses. But the curse of the hungry dead struck several eastern towns before it reached Elknell, and the ancestors spoke of several shadowlands out that way. I can lead us to them if we have no trail to follow.”

“A trail would be better,” said Decea. “Shadowlands can be too small to appear on a map, and the beast probably knows the local ones better than we do. I don’t want to go far out of our way if the beast hasn’t.”

It must have left tracks here, signed Gray, and Decea translated for him.

“Funny thing,” said Eira, “we weren’t the first hunters on the scene. Someone’s obscured the trail, intentionally or not.”

They all looked at Nils, who shrugged. “I didn’t know there was a beast to hunt until just now. But I’ve followed a concealed trail or two in my time, and the lady here’s paid me up for a week. I’ll gladly help you find the culprit.”

“We already have a clue,” said Ake, and he carefully pulled from his pocket a colorful, delicate thing, about the size and thinness of a leaf. “Something was torn from the other trackers’ clothes, some kind of strange silk. Whoever they are, they must not care about being spotted.”

Decea snatched the clue from Ake’s hand and held it up to the sunlight. She could see her fingers through its translucent surface, and the shadowed vein within its filmy substance. It was beautifully iridescent, like oil on water, and it made her sick. “This isn’t silk. It’s part of a wing.”

“Like a fly’s wing?” asked Eira, incredulous. “It’d be enormous.”

“Big enough to ride,” said Decea, lost in thought, “with wings as brilliant as a sunrise.”

The others stared at her, until Gray tapped her shoulder. *What are you talking about?* he signed.

“...it’s an agata, a type of demon-wasp,” she explained, and looked up into the sky. “Some sorcerers summon them to serve as mounts. They’re vicious, frighteningly fast, and loyal.”

“Were y’all expecting any sorcerers to come help with the hunt?” asked Nils.

Decea’s eyes met Ake’s, and he nodded to her slightly. He understood: the Wanasaan were on the hunt. They hadn’t answered Elknell’s call, but other towns had suffered from the curse of the hungry dead as well. One of them had surely met the Wanasaan’s price. And if they knew Elknell had hired Decea, they would spurn and spite Elknell forever after.

Decea’s part in the hunt was over. It was time for her to leave Elknell.

“The afternoon is nearly done,” said Ake. “Let’s return to town.”

“There’s still a few hours left,” said Eira. “We can find the trail.”

“The lady looks a mite shaken,” said Nils.

Decea pulled her hood forward, to hide how pale she'd become. "Help them out, Nils. I need to rest. I'll see all of you in the morning, at the trapper's cabin." And she walked away from the hunting party, forcing herself not to break into a run.



Far from Creation, across a starless silver desert no mortal can find, save by accident, there is Malfeas, also called hell, or the demon city. There, demons dance and worship and tremble in the shadows cast by the exiled enemies of the gods. Monstrous and ancient demons, each with names and long legends, send gifts and whispers across the desert. They do this to tease and torment mortals and Exalted, because it is their way and because most of them have been unable to set foot upon Creation's soil for centuries. Many of the luminaries who could summon them from hell have long passed from this world, and those who remain have forgotten the names and legends of those demons they could summon.

But lesser demons, the varied servants and celebrants and forgotten creations of their alien masters, find their way into Creation through much smaller cracks. Most commonly, they are called by Dragon-Blooded sorcerers, and commanded by dint of superior will. It is the way of demons to serve without rancor those who can break them, for power is the only law they recognize.

Decea had learned the ritual to summon a demon but had never attempted it. She feared the wickedness of a demon whose will she failed to break. She also feared the Decea who wouldn't fail.



Decea walked for a while before she realized she wasn't alone, and her heart nearly leapt out of her chest until she realized it was Gray who followed her. She rested against a tree trunk as he caught up to her, catching her breath. How long had she been paying so little attention? Who might have found her while she was distracted?

Your family is here? signed Gray. Decea blinked in surprise, and Gray added, *I'm not blind. You're shaking. You don't shake in the cold.*

Decea took a breath and let it out. "...Yes. The..." She decided to sign after all, wary that someone might hear her. *My family is here, hunting the beast.*

You're afraid of them.

Decea sighed and nodded.

You're going to leave. Gray folded his arms and looked away from her.

Decea blinked and really looked at Gray. His face showed little emotion, but he wasn't used to controlling his body language, and Decea had been taught the arts of negotiation. Gray was angry and scared, and why wouldn't he be? Decea was the only person he knew who could understand him, translate for him, and teach him about being a Dragon-Blood. He was alone in Creation, like she was.

“You can come with me,” she said without thinking.

Gray looked at her, head cocked as if he hadn’t heard her right.

The words continued to fall out of Decea’s mouth. “The Wise Twain paid me half my silver up front. I have enough left to afford passage for us both on a ship. You’ve done more than the townsfolk could expect from you, wiping out that hive of hungry dead. I don’t think you want to stay with these people, and they would still fear you even if you did. We can both find a better life out there, and...Elkneel doesn’t need us. The Wanasaan will kill the beast.”

Gray signed violently, *The beast killed my mother.*

“And the Wanasaan killed my father!” Decea snapped. Her chest ached at the memory. “My family, they...he was a mortal who married into the clan. They wanted his bloodline, not his cleverness, or courage, or kindness. They wanted him to give them a daughter, not raise her. And when he grew too outspoken, he ‘tragically drowned.’ They said he ‘never listened.’ They said it was ‘just what happens’ to people who don’t understand our ways.”

Decea found herself taking Gray’s hands, and he could feel their chill. “They’ll do it to me, too. That was always the threat beneath the surface. I’ve broken their trust and they’ll finish what they started in that ever-freezing pool.” Or worse, she thought, they would hug her and say everything was all right, and she wouldn’t want to escape any more.

Gray avoided eye contact with her and gently, firmly pulled his hands from her grasp so he could sign to her: *I don’t understand you.* Decea wanted to reply, but he continued: *You say they killed your father, and you’re just running from them. Don’t you care? Don’t you want to make it right? How can you be so cold?*

Decea smiled, though it wasn’t funny. “It’s what they did to me, Gray. The sliver of ice that pool left in my heart. It’s always hungry, and it never melts. I always feel cold, Gray. I shivered for a time, until I got used to never feeling truly warm.

“But I do care.” Decea clutched her bag close and felt the firm edge of the hemlock-wood case. “My father made my herb case for me, and I always keep it near. It helps me remember who I want to be.”

Who’s that? Gray asked. *Someone who runs away?*

“Just — just not them,” Decea said. It wasn’t a satisfying answer, but it was the best one she had.

Go if you want to, signed Gray. *I don’t need you.*

Decea gritted her teeth and lowered her hood. Her sadness and fear were there on her face, and so was her sincerity. She searched for the thing to say that would make him come with her. “Please. I don’t want to leave without you. Neither of us have anyone to talk to, now. Your mother’s gone, and she doesn’t need you anymore. But I...we need each other.”

Gray said nothing. He looked away.

“I’ll find us a ship, and come find you in the morning,” Decea said, and took a few steps backward before turning away. “Please don’t make me go alone.”

Gray stood there, looking at the ground, for a long time after Decea had left.



The three mortals split sometimes and worked together other times. Ake retired from the cold first, and left Eira and Nils to keep searching for tracks.

After near an hour of companionable, professional silence, Nils said to Eira, “I think this hunt might be more trouble than it’s worth.”

“May be,” said Eira. “Demons, sorcerers, beasts that can eat souls...the dead were bad enough.”

“I reckon it’s worse than my esteemed patron will admit. I...*overheard* her talking about the Wanasaan with the boy, after they ran off.” When Eira didn’t respond, Nils added, “I’m sure I could return the silver I was given. I’ll have made good money when I turn in these hands.”

“Why don’t you?” asked Eira.

“Maybe I will. What about you?”

Eira didn’t respond at first. She’d worked with Nils for a few weeks, now, clearing out the dead, and thought she knew him better than most. He wasn’t one for expressing concern about other folks, not in so many words. Eventually, she asked, “Those dead folk you helped put down. Any of them look familiar?”

Nils looked away. “No. Sorry.”

Eira nodded, unsurprised. “Thanks for trying. You didn’t owe me that.”

“It’s not always about what we owe, you know,” said Nils.

“Maybe not for you,” said Eira, and she went back to searching for tracks. Nils sighed and went to help her.



At the cusp between afternoon and evening, Gray stood at the door to the cabin he’d lived in for as long as he could recall. Despite the dwindling light and the loss of the day’s little heat, Gray felt no desire to go inside. The warmth of the hearth, the sizzle of meat on the griddle, the familiar texture of the iron water kettle...these memories felt frozen in ice. If he revisited them now, he felt they would melt and be revealed as something new and strange and unwelcome.

So he didn’t go inside. Instead, he went to the firewood shelter he and his mother had built and emptied it out. The winter was over, and he had never felt the cold like his aging mother had. Gray arranged the wood a few dozen paces away from the trapper’s cabin, in the way his mother had taught him and, as the sun began to set, he lit a bonfire with a spark from his fingertips. With him feeding it wood, it would burn all night, out where anybody could see. He sat upon a log, with his wood axe resting on his knees, and waited for the dead to find him, if any remained to rove the night.

Before the sun sank into darkness, another figure approached. It was Eira, the hunter. Though she was bundled warmly, she shook with a day's accumulated cold. She waited a polite distance from Gray's bonfire, until he made room for her on the log. Then she sat by him and warmed herself by the bonfire.

"Ake headed home a while ago," she said after a while. "Nils actually pulled his weight. Think we might've found the beast's trail. Tracks look like a bear's, but bigger. Paces farther apart."

Gray nodded. His memories of the beast were warped by stress, but he thought it might have been bear-like. Then he gestured to the setting sun, to remind Eira that night was falling.

"I know. I know. Should've come back a while ago. Wanted to see the tracks for myself. Follow them as far as I could to get the beast's bearing, in case the weather changed and we lost them."

Gray looked at her, saw her staring into the fire. She wouldn't understand anything he signed, so he didn't bother. He wasn't sure if any of this even affected him any longer.

"Planning to stay out here all night?"

Gray huffed. It was meant as a "yes," and she took it as one.

"Draw the hungry dead to you, you know. Light out in the open like this."

Gray didn't respond. He knew.

"Don't suppose you saw a woman down in that hole in the earth, a little younger than me? Lighter hair than mine. Same eyes."

Gray didn't respond. He couldn't remember, had chosen not to pay close attention. Decea would know, he thought.

"That's all right. Don't know what I'd do if you told me. Better if she just froze out there, somewhere. Never too responsible, my sister."

Gray couldn't help growling. Too many people had lost family.

Eira didn't say anything for a while. The sun sank further. She didn't ask to stay with Gray, here by the fire, for the night, but she didn't get up, either. As the sky darkened, she set her spear aside, took out a few arrows, and stuck them in a row, point-up in the snow. She fished in her bag and found a rag to tie to each. "Arrows might not mean much to the hungry dead," she said. "Might help if you light 'em first."

Gray thought it was a good enough idea. He didn't understand much about the power within him, but he knew it was good for setting things alight. After exerting himself so much earlier in the day, he'd felt as if that power were spent, but over hours it seemed to rekindle within him.

"Your friend, the lady." Once Eira said it, she didn't seem to know how to follow it up. "She all right?"

Gray thought it over and sighed. He shook his head.

“Think we lost her?”

Gray didn’t know how to respond.

“If we lose her, we lose Nils. Maybe Ake, too. He’s old, and he joined this hunt to protect the town. Elknell might need him at home more than out here.”

Gray’s shoulders slumped. He didn’t know how to respond.

Eira watched the fire for a while. Eventually, quietly, she said, “Said I owe you, and I still do. But that’s not all. Monster that killed your mother, maybe killed my sister. Took all our ancestors away. Might never hear my grandmam whispering around the shrine again. Don’t know that we’d be protecting Elknell anymore, but all that pain, feels like we’re owed some satisfaction, or justice.”

My mother would know the right thing to do, Gray signed, knowing that Eira couldn’t understand it. Counting on it.

“Can’t do it alone,” said Eira. “But if anyone else is hunting, I’m hunting.”

Gray looked down at the snow for a while, but not for too long. He held out his hand and Eira took it.

There was nothing left to discuss, so they waited for the cries and calls of the dead.



chapter five

Familiarity

In Decea's dreams, she recalled the heart-stopping beauty of the agata the first time she saw one. It glittered overhead like a rainbow in the sun, graceful curves giving way to sharp edges when she looked closely. She was a younger woman, already Exalted but not yet initiated into the deepest mysteries of her clan. She had long looked forward to being able to summon the mist that was the Wanasaan's ominous introduction, but it hadn't occurred to her that sorcery might be beautiful, too.

In the dream, Decea knew it was time for her wonder to fade as the demon-wasp descended to the earth of the Silent Isle bearing Decea's cousin, Bagra. Bagra was a proud woman, taller than Decea, whose Aspect of Water marked her with the persistent scent of rain. Only ten years Decea's senior, she already bore the ancient certainty of her mother, Vathys.

Decea had learned years ago that obvious comments like, "It's beautiful," would only earn a condescending look from Bagra, so she tore her gaze from the wasp and focused on her reading. Bagra spoke to the wasp, and let it fly off on some errand. It needed no handling from the isle's mortal servants, and it was unpredictably violent besides. Bagra wisely kept the creature occupied.

In time, Bagra approached Decea and asked, "Well, cousin, how go your studies?"

"Well enough," said Decea, affecting unconcern. "I'm familiarizing myself with great-grandmother Adiura's sorcerous theories of Essence. I want to be prepared when I undergo the initiation of the frozen spring."

Bagra snorted. "You know that no amount of reading can prepare you, Decea, as Mother has told you. Sorcery is instinctive, not studied — earned, not learned."

"Perhaps I'll master sorcery differently than you and Aunt Vathys have," said Decea, petulantly.

"You study because you're afraid you'll fail," said Bagra, and that was strange. It wasn't what she'd said that day on the Silent Isle. But she continued: "You study because you know you're weak, and you only pretend to belong with us."

Decea didn't know what to say. Nothing was ever the right thing to say to Bagra, or to Vathys, or to Decea's own mother. Nothing was ever right because Decea was never quite right. Her name meant liar in an old, tribal tongue, a judgment that would hang over her no matter where she ran.

And Decea was young and mortal again, holding books to her chest and ignoring conversations whispered just loudly enough for her to hear. She strained to avoid hearing about the clan's dwindling wealth, about cruel punishments for those who upset the established order, about family strife that became bloody when individuals tragically put their personal greed over the welfare of the Wanasaan. She avoided suspicious glances from conspiratorial relatives, and delayed talks about her marital duties. She rejoiced as her would-be husband backed out of the deal, even as she dutifully worked to find a new contract.

It would be a waste, after all, if the frozen spring killed her, and she hadn't even given the clan a child yet.

Decea worked and ignored and agreed and avoided and remade herself every day, because it would all be worthwhile when the frozen spring killed her, and she came back better.

She did come back. Just not better.

Decea woke from her dream gasping for air, freezing despite the warmth of the longhouse and the fur in which she'd wrapped herself. Other guests of the longhouse slept soundly — or loudly — in their own furs around her. It was still nighttime, and the longhouse door was still barred. Decea hoped that Gray had destroyed enough of the hungry dead the day before to make the town safer. As long as the beast didn't return, the plague of the dead would dwindle over time. But any new attack would rekindle the flames of paranoia in Elknell.

But that isn't my problem anymore, she reminded herself. And, failing to fall back asleep, she reminded herself again and again until sunrise.



Decea was tired, but motivated to reach the trapper's cabin as soon as possible. She had found a caravan that planned to travel south along the coastal road, and which was willing to take her and Gray on as an apothecary and guard, respectively. She had discovered that while ship captains were too superstitious to take on a beastfolk passenger (or too practical to take on a Fire Aspect), caravan merchants were willing to pay for his protection. And Decea would be invaluable as his translator. The caravan would leave near noon, with or without them, and it would be far easier to simply escape the messy situation in Elknell if she and Gray left before Eira, Ake, and Nils arrived at the arranged meeting place.

She had only to convince Gray to come along. She'd spent hours thinking of just what to say.

When she arrived at the trapper's cabin, Gray was not there. He had left a dead bonfire, thick with ashes and several charred corpses. Decea examined them just long enough to be sure she didn't know any of them personally, before investigating the cabin itself.

It was a cozy place, with room enough for two to sleep comfortably. There was a stone hearth, and an iron kettle, and wooden racks to dry out clothes. But the

pantry was empty, and few of Gray's clothes were still there. Decea could feel the echo of the trapper's life, but she knew the trapper's ghost would never return here. And, she suspected, neither would the trapper's son.

Decea sat down in a worn wooden chair, draped with a bear pelt. She didn't bother to look for firewood for the hearth, or even to close the door. She allowed the wind to blow and time to pass through the abandoned cabin, as she sat alone.



When Ake arrived at the trapper's cabin, Decea didn't hear him approach, or even respond as he stepped indoors. The old man looked around, and though there was much he didn't know, he felt that he grasped what mattered. He closed the door against the cold wind and scraped together what little firewood remained inside the cabin. He set a fire in the hearth and took the iron kettle outside to pack snow within it. He set the kettle to boil over the hearth and rested in the only empty chair remaining in the cabin.

Ake sat and looked at Decea while Decea looked at nothing. In time, the snow melted and became hot water. Ake mixed that with a bracing, bitter herb Udom had been cultivating for years, in cups that the trapper had bought from a merchant in town. They drank the bitter concoction in silence, together.



When someone knocked at the door, Decea said "Come in."

The bounty hunter obeyed and closed the door behind him. If he was surprised to see only two other people present, he didn't show it. Instead, he took the opportunity to remove his scarf and hat and enjoy the relative warmth of the cabin. Nils was handsome, despite a few scars on his face and one on his scalp, with warm brown skin and dark hair wound in tight locks.

"Tell me what you found," ordered Decea, with little kindness in her tone, as Nils warmed his hands by the small fire.

"Found us a solid trail, my lady. Would think it a bear from its tracks, but it's much too large."

"It might have been a bear once," said Decea, "before some curse or corruption twisted it. Or maybe it was never a true live bear, but rather the idea of one, conjured up by the Underworld."

Nils grunted, interested in the idea but unable to contribute much to it. Instead, he gave her the bad news: "If I don't miss my guess, the beast's heading steady east-by-northeast. And my horoscope says that's a bad direction to travel today."

"I did notice a chill wind coming from the east today," agreed Ake. "The weather may turn against us."

"East?" Decea asked herself. She stood from her chair to pour herself more hot water, which Nils took as an invitation to seat himself. The witch continued musing, "A bear would make sense, given the lair we found in the forest. But why go back the way it came?"

“The boy took its eye, didn’t he?” asked Ake. “Might be the bear decided Elk-nell was dangerous and went back to grounds where it felt safer.”

Nils cleared his throat to break into the speculation. “I expected Eira and the boy to be here,” he said. “Might I hazard a guess that they’ve left us behind?”

Decea sipped slowly at her now-diluted brew. Ake answered for her, “I believe so.”

“There’s a boy who’s braver than he is smart,” said Nils. “But Eira’s got a good head on her shoulders. She’ll keep him going the right way and tell him to turn back when the time’s right.”

“He’s not turning back,” said Decea.

Nils sighed. “Maybe he won’t. But it’s out of our hands now.”

“Is it?” asked Decea.

Nils frowned at her. “Lady, I saw how you looked when you found out we were competing with the Wanasaan. You’re not as subtle as you think. You and I know that you’re running from something meaner than a devil-bear. And none of us profit from going up against the Wanasaan, especially if they’re going to take care of the beast for us.”

Decea didn’t react. She began to pour hot water for Nils, but he held up a hand to stop her and said, “I’ll pour my own drink, thank you kindly.” When she raised an eyebrow, the bounty hunter shrugged. “I realize you’ve had a cultured upbringing, but I’ve had a few folks take liberties with my drinks over the years.”

Decea stepped away from the cup and the hot kettle. As Nils stepped up to pour for himself, Decea said, “You know, I never mentioned the Wanasaan to you.”

Before Nils could think of a response, he felt a sharp prick in his neck. He knocked the kettle over, spilling scalding water on the floor, and whirled around to grab Decea by her cloak collar. She resisted briefly before he slammed her back against the cabin wall with one hand. With his other, he drew his cutting knife and held it to her throat.

“What did you do to me?” he demanded.

“What’s going on?” demanded Ake, drawing his own knife.

Decea slowly raised one hand, which held a thin, sturdy needle. A droplet of Nils’ blood trembled on its tip. Nils recognized an assassin’s weapon when he saw one — drawn, perhaps, in the moments he focused on pouring water.

“Everything you’ve said is correct,” said Decea, “But you’re wrong if you think my ‘cultured upbringing’ didn’t teach me to recognize a betrayal in the making, or to rectify it immediately. If I never mentioned the Wanasaan, you must have eavesdropped on me or done your own snooping. You’ll sell me out to them as soon as you can. For all I know, the weather’s fine, and you’re planning to go find the Wanasaan immediately.”

“Lady, that ain’t what I asked,” said Nils with an angry sneer. He pressed the knife to Decea’s throat, with enough pressure to draw blood. “What did you do to me?”

“I had a great-uncle die from poison. It’s been an interest of mine since childhood.” Decea struggled to breathe as Nils’ fist tightened around her collar. “This one’s called spirits’ tears. It acts slowly, but in a few days—”

“My body’ll go numb, and my limbs’ll turn useless for the rest of my days,” Nils finished for her. “I’ve heard. And I expect there’s an antidote you can give me.” He fought to sound calm and in control, with some success.

“And I will,” said Decea, “once we’ve caught up with Gray.”

“No deal,” said the bounty hunter. “I think you’ll give it to me now.”

And, with a burst of blue and black Essence, Decea exploded into dozens of black-feathered birds. Their wing beats and harsh cries filled the cabin, and the two mortal men shouted in shock and terror. They struggled to find the door and stumble out of the chaos, falling to their knees and gasping for breath out in the cold. They turned as one to look up as the birds coalesced into a familiar form, crouched atop the trapper’s cabin.

Decea was whole again, a streak of blood running down her neck. She rubbed the blood away with her thumb, and the skin underneath was already whole. The wind swirled around Decea, and her white hair floated eerily against the blue sky.

“You’re in no position to make demands,” said the witch, “but you do have a choice. Come with us and you’ll get the antidote, doled out in small doses, and all the silver I promised you. Or run and take the chance that mortal apothecaries will be able to help you.”

Nils shouted, as it was easier to seem angry than afraid. “Yeah, well, maybe you’re just lying! Maybe there ain’t any poison on that needle at all!”

“Look in my eyes,” the witch offered, “and tell me I care enough about your life to lie about poisoning you.”

Nils tried, but he couldn’t look in her icy blue eyes for long. So he stood, dusted himself off, and pulled his hood up. “...I’ll fetch us some supplies we’ll need for the journey. If that’s okay with you, lady.”

“Move quickly,” said Decea, and Nils obeyed.

Once Decea hopped down from the roof to the snow-covered ground, she helped a stunned Ake to his feet.

“Was that necessary?” asked Ake. “How can you know for certain he would have betrayed you?”

“I don’t have to know,” said Decea. “He’s mine now, regardless of what he intended.”

Ake turned to watch the bounty hunter go. “I do not think you care about the beast, and I do not think it is about the silver we gave you to hunt it, so I think this must be out of love for the boy. But this is a cold kind of love, Decea.”

“Maybe that’s the only kind I have,” said Decea.



Eira and Gray set out on their journey at first glimpse of sunlight. Even after a night of corpse-cutting work, the fire inside Gray pushed him forward, and he hadn't wished to wait around. He'd made up his mind to avenge his mother, and he didn't care to hear more cowardly excuses from Decea. Eira was older and mortal, with no fur but what she wore, but her own revenge kept her upright. Gray burned Essence on occasion just to keep his anima warm for her, even as the weather turned windy.

The trail was broad and straight as an arrow, as if the beast knew where it was going, or sought to outpace the weather. When clouds darkened the sky and snow began to fall, when the trail became obscured and Eira's legs faltered, Gray hoisted her on his back and carried her. He pushed himself as hard as he could short of bursting into flame, and when he could go no further and his fire burned dim, they built a shelter of snow and slept like the dead, huddled close together.

The second day was warmer and clearer, but snow had already erased the beast's trail. They pressed on as they had been, following the path predicted by the beast's determined stride. They carefully searched each cave, hole, and burrow they passed on the way, and didn't lack for shelter. Gray heard strange music and laughter that night, and longed to join the revelry, but he remembered his mother's stories about capricious spirits that lured travelers to their death in the wilds. He covered his ears until the music passed.

On the third day, they found a crushed and ruined wagon, and discovered beast-bitten corpses hiding in the heavy snow nearby. They burned the corpses and the wagon before nightfall and found the beast's trail once more.

On the fourth day, they trekked through treacherous woods and mountainous slopes, and Eira twisted her ankle. Gray carried her once more, but he soon grew tired as well. When they came across a snow-drowned town cut through by a mountain stream, Gray was relieved they might get some much-needed rest and supplies, and nervous about the reception he'd receive from the residents. As they approached, though, it became clear that the town had been abandoned for a long time.



There are places like this, empty towns and colonies, scattered across the North of Creation. Some are founded on financial or religious promises that never come through. Others suffer drought, famine, or plague, and are abandoned for places deemed safer. Some fall afoul of spirits or the fae, or something stranger, and change from lively to empty between one day and the next. Some places, it's rumored, are occupied solely by ghosts, who may be jealous of their homes, or eager for living worshipers.

There had been living folk that called this town home, once, and dead folk, too. By the time Gray and Eira found it, it was almost entirely empty of either.



The town had no food stores to speak of, but Eira knew the ways of river fishing, and the house by the old watermill still had a door. It was a fair place to wait until Eira could walk comfortably again, though waiting was torture to Gray. He stayed with Eira as long as it took her to feel settled, then took the first suggestion she made that would keep him occupied: exploring the town.

Gray had never spent much time in any home but his own, but he had visited Elknell enough to imagine some of what daily life must have been like here. He investigated homes and wrecked canoes and saw dusty shrines for honored ancestors. The remains of the general store had broken equipment for digging and measuring, and what he gradually recognized as climbing equipment. Maybe this place had been a mining town, once. Maybe an enterprising young Exalt could find silver, or gemstones, or precious jade out in the nearby mountains. Or maybe the town was empty because the mine had failed or collapsed.

When Gray stepped back out into the snow-covered road through town, it had changed. The clear day had become foggy, and vapor clung wetly to his fur. The blue sky had been swallowed by haze, and the mountain stream's babble had become distant and muted. Without hesitation, Gray started running back to where he'd left Eira. It was only on the way that he thought about who was known for announcing their presence with a chill fog.

He imagined for a moment that Decea had changed her mind, that she had stayed and followed him and decided to help. But he knew that was only a dream. He couldn't count on Decea to help him now. He drew his axe as he ran.

As he got closer, he saw something glittering through the fog, like a rainbow, or like lantern oil on water.



When Eira first saw the wasp, she was happy. It was beautiful, entrancing as it circled overhead, shimmering like a jewel in the sunlight. After interminable days of cold and constant movement — after a full life of hard work and loss — Eira felt like the distant wasp circled just for her. Just so she could appreciate it. A kind spirit come to bless her with a reminder of beauty.

But life had beaten the old ways deep into Eira's bones, and she knew that spirits were rarely kind for kindness' sake. She had seen a fragment of those beautiful wings before, held by a frightened witch. Eira stood, despite her unsteady ankle, and strung her hunting bow. She nocked an arrow, pulled the string to her cheek, and...and...and.

It really was so beautiful, the demon-wasp. She tried to imagine hurting it, or even loosing a warning arrow, but it was as unthinkable as shattering her grandmother's shrine. So, she watched the wasp circle overhead, arrow at the ready, and didn't notice the fog creeping in around her, or who hid within it.



Gray saw figures in the mist, dressed in pale colors, lingering just at the edge of sight. He smelled blood and saltwater, and he wondered if they had stumbled into a shadowland by accident and drawn hungry ghosts to them. He didn't let it slow him down, though, and he soon heard the creaking of the watermill's wheel. He followed it to the stream, and came to a stop, axe raised over his shoulder, when he saw demons.

The first was a human-like creature, lavender-skinned and hairless. They wore cloth and fur like a person might, but cut for decoration more than for protection from the cold. Brass jewelry dangled from their throat, and dark eyes looked at Gray apologetically. The demon had pinned Eira to the wooden dock, their bare knee against the small of her back, deft hands holding Eira's arm firmly in place.

The second was shaped almost like a man, but much bigger, with tufts of thick, matted red fur and overlong arms. Gray had never seen or heard of an ape, and he would have seen only a slight resemblance if he had, for this creature sported piercing, tusk-like fangs and horny protrusions. It grinned at Gray obscenely, as a starving man might grin at a meal. It hunched over Eira, as if waiting for the smaller demon to release her so the ape might devour her.

The third was the demon-wasp, which stood atop the watermill, deliberate wing beats stirring the fog around it. The muted daylight brought subtler hues from its scintillating carapace. Astride the wasp sat a woman who wore a white, flowing shroud and a concealing mask carved from a single piece of whalebone. She had readied a bow carved from black jade, which gleamed even in the fog-dimmed light.

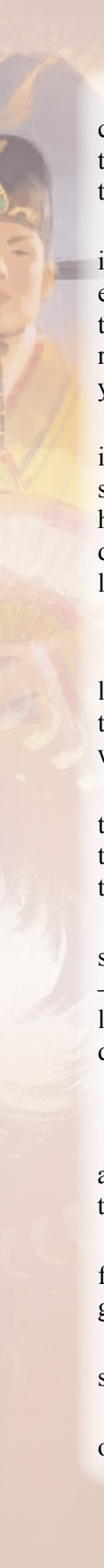
Even though he felt outmatched by the demons...even though the marvelous bow seemed imposing...even though he had glimpsed other figures in the fog, who might have now surrounded him...Gray nearly charged the graceful creature that had pinned Eira, heart alive with burning glory. But the masked woman twitched one finger, and the lavender-skinned demon tightened their grip, drawing a gasp of pain from the hunter.

Gray stopped where he stood. He gritted his sharp teeth, lowered his axe, and swallowed the fire that demanded release. Only a growl escaped.

"A wise decision, beast-born," remarked the masked woman. "We have no need to harm her, or yourself, unless your purpose crosses ours. Now, tell me what brings you to this forgotten place."

Gray glared at her. He had had enough of reasonable-sounding exorcists. Knowing she wouldn't understand him, he signed, *Leave us be, ghost-killer. If you harm my friend, or get in the way of my hunt, I will burn you all.*

The woman cocked her head, and Gray was prepared for her to dismiss him, or threaten Eira to force him to speak up. Instead, she said, "Neomah."



“Yes, master,” said the lavender-skinned demon, speaking with a strange accent. “The boy knows your purpose, yet he threatens you. One wonders if he hunts the Barrow-Bruin, also.” Gray tried to conceal all response, but the demon saw through him: “Oh, yes. He hunts your prey, master, and would conceal it from you.”

“He must know, then, who we are, and that the Wanasaan brook no interference in our sacred work.” The exorcist leaned forward, as her demon-wasp mount shifted its legs in an anticipatory dance. “Yet we are not without mercy. Tell us where to find the rest of your hunting party, and you may escape with your lives. We will root them out in time regardless, and it is a better offer than the Bruin would give you, should you reach it.”

Gray had limited experience with people, but some of his oldest memories were interactions with strangers much like this: offers of mere kindness in exchange for something of practical worth. Every time Gray had taken this offer in the past, he had been cheated and laughed at for being gullible. When he’d learned to turn it down, he had been insulted and attacked for seeming selfish or hostile. What people like this exorcist really wanted, Gray had learned, was to control him.

He looked at Eira, and she shook her head.

He looked at the demon that had the hunter pinned, and they watched him with large eyes that urged caution. He knew he couldn’t fool them or hide anything from them. They were a master of the language of movement, able to express themselves with a glance, and to see Gray’s mind in his every movement.

Unable to outwit this “neomah,” or to overpower the hulking demon behind them, or to outpace the demon-wasp, or to out-negotiate the exorcist, Gray resolved to simply be as difficult as possible. If the exorcist wanted control, she would have to fight for it.

Gray ran back the way he’d come, with a burst of speed so sudden it left a short-lived trail of flame where he trod. Wanasaan warriors — or assassins, perhaps — materialized from the fog with knives, but he ducked one’s outstretched arm and leapt over the other as she slashed at his legs. He left them behind and searched desperately for a place to hide as the demon-ape roared in the distance.



Eira tried to call out to Gray, to cheer on his escape, but the creature pressing against her back left her just enough breath to stay conscious. She wanted to fight, to force them to free her or finish her off, but her body wouldn’t cooperate.

Eira could only listen as the Wanasaan exorcist spoke aloud, shocked. “A beast-folk Exalt? How could the blood of the Dragons flow so strongly through a mongrel?”

“Let us negotiate with him, master,” said the demon pinning Eira, “and perhaps study his pedigree.”

“Let us crush him, master,” bellowed the demon-ape, “and taste his blood for ourselves.”

“Let him go, master,” suggested the demon-wasp, “and savor the encounter for the marvelous disgust it engendered.”

“Silence,” commanded the exorcist, and the demons obeyed. She continued, “We will not allow intruders to interrupt our sacred work, and I doubt these two were foolish enough to come here alone. I charge you, neomah and erymanthus, to capture that boy, or kill him if you cannot capture him. Once you’ve succeeded, or he’s escaped you, return to me with what remains of him. Cousins, come with me, for our hunt continues.”

The demon-ape — the erymanthus — roared its assent and barreled away after Gray, while white-clad, masked Wanasaan killers appeared from the fog and dashed past Eira just as suddenly. Eira heard the strange thrum of the agata’s wings as it took flight with the exorcist on its back.

Alone with Eira now, the neomah leaned down and whispered in the hunter’s ear with a soft, hypnotic voice. “You’ve heard my orders, mortal, and I cannot disobey. Tell me your tale, and perhaps together we will find a way to keep your rebellious friend alive.”



chapter six

Finding Gray

Despite the urgency she felt, and despite the promise of harsh weather to come, Decea did not rush her small party's departure from Elknell. There were supplies to purchase, maps to check, goodbyes to give, caravan job offers to decline...and a ritual to perform.

Alone, a half-mile north from Elknell, Decea shed her bag and clothes on the cruel, salt-stained rocks of the shore. She walked into the sea and felt a cold beyond what she had felt every waking moment of the last year. She felt the memory of that ever-freezing spring, and felt the breathless darkness of death. She allowed herself to float on the sea's surface, and in her memories.

Decea stayed there, bobbing with the waves and staring up into the sky, for an hour or more.

It is the nature of the Exalted to breathe in the Essence of Creation to restore themselves. Clever Dragon-Blooded learn to draw strength from the five elements themselves, to replenish the power that lives in their blood. And each sorcerer knows a dozen subtle ways beyond these, for they have glimpsed some few of Creation's secrets.

Decea died in the frozen spring a year ago and carried a sliver of its ice in her heart ever since. That sliver had never forgotten its origin, and through saltwater always knew the way back home. On the ocean's surface, where the sea met the air, Decea lived and died and lived again in memory, and drank in the power of the spring that had enlightened her long ago. Her whirling thoughts, her tears, her regrets — all flowed out of her to be swallowed by the sea.

Decea left the sea with ice crystals spiraling on her flesh and did not shiver.



Ake had hunted many beasts and a few worse things in his years, but he had never hunted people. On the first day of their journey, wind and snow came and wiped away the beast's trail, and so Ake's role turned protective. He knew how to survive any northern weather that could be survived, and he knew the land's safest and most dangerous places. Ake kept Decea alive; Decea fed Nils strange clay-wrapped pills that she said kept his poison at bay; and Nils kept them on the trail not of the beast, but of Gray and Eira.

Ake had expected Nils to act resentful of his position, but the bounty hunter was pleasant, considerate, and helpful throughout their journey. When no weapons were drawn the first night, Ake thought that perhaps Nils understood how to hold a grudge secret and safe until it could be acted upon. When Nils sang songs he'd heard in his journeys on the second night, Ake thought that perhaps the bounty hunter viewed betrayal and manipulation as inevitable hazards of his occupation, and did not hold grudges at all. When Ake saw the two young people smile and blush and laugh at each other's humor on the third night, he thought that perhaps they were more alike than he had realized.

Perhaps they were both so used to living among liars, cheats, and betrayers, that they were comfortable not knowing when the knife would come. Perhaps they were most relaxed when they did not have to decide whether their words were true or false, and whether they were friends or foes.

Ake hated it. He was old and did not need any more hunting trophies. He wished he were home, with his husband's gentle honesty. But he also knew what Udom would say: That Ake hadn't joined the hunt for friendship or glory. That he'd joined the hunt to avenge Elknell's ancestors. That he'd joined the hunt to do what was right.

Udom always knew what was right, and Ake always did what was right. That was the wisdom Elknell needed.

And so, on the third night, when he thought Decea asleep, while the wind howled at the mouth of the cave where they'd taken shelter, Ake sat by Nils and said, "If I die along the way — if the beast doesn't take my soul — bring some piece of me back to Elknell, if you're able. Back to my husband."

Nils glanced at the sleeping Exalt and said, "There's a powerful witch right over there. Why not ask her?"

"Before they fled, our ancestors whispered that the Wanasaan fed on the dead, just as the beast does. I want my soul to return home intact."

"Your old ways aren't mine," said Nils, "but I thought the Wise Twain forswore any worship in death. Do you mean to linger on, without any prayer to sustain you?"

"Elknell's ancestors have all gone," said Ake. "My people need guidance. They need someone to answer their prayers. I'll do that for them."

"And if some of the older ancestors return, and are angry with you?"

"Then I will call them cowards for fleeing and dare them to punish me."

Nils grinned. "I'll take that job, you stubborn old man. And I won't even charge much."

Ake grumbled in a pleased way, taking "stubborn" as a compliment. "And if you die? What arrangements would best honor you?"

Nils looked up at the cave's ceiling, imagining. "Just make sure that whatever — or whoever — kills me gets killed right back."



On that night, in the hours before sunrise, Nils slipped out of the cave he shared with his companions. The old man was snoring fiercely and didn't notice. Nils thought the witch might have watched him go, but she didn't try to stop him. If she'd really poisoned him, then he'd either come back or die out in the cold. If she'd lied about the poison, then she probably lacked either the will or the means to force him to stay anyhow.

In the deep of the night, aurora-spirits sometimes danced in rippling waves across the northern skies. But they often fled just before the sky began to lighten, and left the stars clear to any who wished to see them. With no clouds or snow in the way either, Nils had some time with his oldest friends.

Creation abounds with would-be astrologers, prophets, and soothsayers, but most learn their arts from studying star charts, or see in the stars only what they wish to see. Few are born with the gift to see the truth in the wheeling stars. Nils didn't know why other people paid so little attention to what was written in the sky, but he'd learned to take advantage of their ignorance. The stars always spoke true, though Nils didn't always understand what they'd meant until later.

The bounty hunter's gaze swept across the sky, and he saw and understood.

He saw the constellation of the loyal Ewer, descending, and knew that someone he cared for was in danger, or would be soon.

He saw the crescent moon, two-faced mirror of the soul, scything through the constellation of the ecstatic Shield, and thought that the boy he hunted might be due for a change of heart.

He saw the constellation of the resilient Ship's Wheel rolling along the eastern horizon, near the impending sunrise, and decided their hunt was not without hope.

And he saw the Violet Sister, wandering star of endings, cut through the constellation of the Sorcerer, holder of knowledge and power. He took it to mean he would see a sign when it was time to betray the witch.

Nils returned to his companions, calm. The stars were always there for him.



On the fourth day of their journey, the hunting party found Gray's and Eira's tracks, fresh. Then they found only Gray's, and Nils suggested the boy might be carrying the older hunter. They followed the trail to a lifeless town at the foot of a mountain. Ake recalled hearing of the place, too young to earn a lasting name before it was abandoned a year or so prior. It had been a mining town until, it was said, the mine swallowed all the miners in a few nights.

"Or something living in the mine did," said Decea, walking toward the town ahead of the other two. "Something that woke up ravenous when they disturbed—"

Decea slowed to a halt and stared into the distance. Something flew from the town, multihued, like the sun viewed through an ice crystal. Beautiful from far away, though she knew it was even more breathtaking up close.

“They’re here,” she whispered.

Ake followed her gaze, and readied his bow, stringing it with the swiftness of many years’ experience. “You knew they might be. It’s too late to turn back.”

“It’s not too late until we’re spotted,” said Nils, “and that thing looks to be scouting the mountainside. We could retreat and find a place to hide.”

“...Gray and Eira are in that town, aren’t they?” asked Decea.

“If they’re still alive,” said Nils.

Decea nodded and continued on toward the mining town. Ake followed close after her, bow readied. Nils sighed, drew his sword, and followed after.



Gray sprinted as fast as he could down the town’s central road, but it didn’t take him long to realize that the snow on the ground posed a major problem to concealment. His tracks would have been obvious even if his feet weren’t hot enough to melt the snow outright. The Wanasaan he assumed were chasing him didn’t have to be professional hunters or trackers to follow a trail that clear. So he slowed down some, allowed his feet to cool, and searched the town more carefully as he ran.

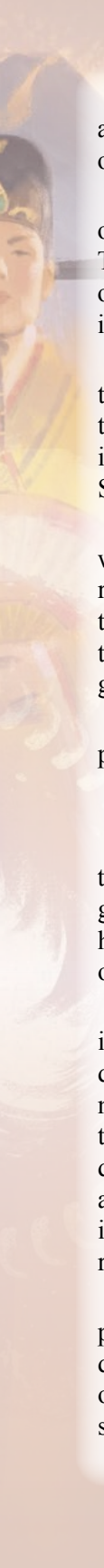
The abandoned store he’d explored loomed to his right, with its door — which he’d apparently forgotten to shut — swinging open in the wind. To avoid leaving a trail toward the store, Gray turned left instead. He found a long-unused horse-hitching post and leapt toward it with a burst of heat fueling his speed. He used his wood axe to hook the post, swing around it, and redirect his momentum to fling him across the street and through the open doorway.

Though he had conceived of the whole idea, and believed he could accomplish it, the speed of his success outpaced his planning, and he failed to skid to a graceful halt on his feet. Instead, he tumbled through the open door and crashed loudly into the opposite wall. He was back on his feet in an instant, though, and scrambled across the small store to pull the door shut as quickly and quietly as he could, just as he heard the lumbering gallop of the approaching demon-ape.

He heard the creature’s loud panting outside, and then an ear-splitting roar and the crash of splintering wood a few moments later. The demon was no patient, subtle tracker. Gray looked around the abandoned store for anything he could use to help him escape or, better yet, fight back.



An erymanthus is not a stupid demon, but it is a simple one. It is cruel and brutal, forever hungry for fresh blood and whatever meat contains it. Erymanthoi hunger for humans and cats above all, and so they long to be summoned to Creation, where there is so much gory havoc to wreak. They can lurk unseen by mortal eyes as most spirits can, but they prefer not to. They often devour summoners who fail to tame them, and exercise restraint only when ordered to by strong-willed sorcerers.



This erymanthus' master had not cared to ask its name, or to name it herself, and the erymanthus did not care to reveal any name it might have had. It had its orders and its nature, which were the only markers of identity its master required.

The erymanthus would never contradict or willingly misconstrue its master's orders, but when its prey's trail suddenly ended, its nature informed its strategy. The demon gave a cursory sniff of the cold, foggy air, and when it found no scent of blood, it let out a bellow, ripped a nearby hitching post from the earth, and used it to crack apart the nearest abandoned wooden building like an egg.

There was a certain joy in wanton destruction, of course, but this was no tantrum for the erymanthus. If the human was hiding in any of the town's buildings, then methodically destroying all of the buildings would eventually reveal him. And if the human was injured in the process, then he would be easier to capture or kill. Simple. But not stupid.

The demon-ape crashed through a tavern, tossing aside empty casks, but turned when it heard a high-pitched creak. A door across the road had swung open, and revealed, for just a moment, the gray-furred human behind it. The human slammed the door shut immediately, but it was too late, of course. The demon dashed across the street and barreled through the door, splintering it immediately with a roar of gleeful anticipation.

This was the demon's mistake. It had no way of knowing its prey was a trapper's boy.



Gray's snare, hastily constructed from discarded leather harnesses looped over the store's rafters, caught the demon's ankle. With no tree or counterweight to trigger it, Gray poured fire into his muscles and pulled the trap taut with a burning heave. The demon-ape was all bone and muscle, too dense and quick-moving to overturn entirely, but the trap was enough to upend the demon heavily onto its back.

With the trap's work done and no time to strike precisely, Gray raised his axe in both hands and brought a fiery chop down heavily into the demon's belly. It sank deep and hissed in the creature's stinking flesh, and the erymanthus screamed like nothing Gray had ever encountered. Gray yanked his axe away and stepped back so the creature's long arms couldn't reach him, but the demon-ape's feet were just as dexterous, and they grasped him by the waist with terrible strength. Even as Gray's almost-healed ribs screamed at him, the demon lifted him from the floor, raised itself into a handstand, and smashed Gray through the store's wooden rafters and roof.

Bruised and dazed, but desperate to free himself from the erymanthus' obscene paws, Gray stuck his axe into the roof for leverage and heaved himself out of the demon's grasp. It roared in challenge and leapt straight up at him. Gray rolled out of the way as the demon shattered the roof, and they both tumbled down into the snow-covered street. Despite its deep wound and the snare still tangled around one

leg, the demon rolled upright first, and Gray found himself scrambling away from it in a frightened half-crawl. The demon raised its fists high and would have brought them down to smash Gray into the earth if an arrow hadn't flown just over Gray's head and buried itself in the meat of the demon's chest.

The demon recoiled, stung, and Gray found himself filled with relief when he heard Decea's voice call his name.

He sprinted away from the demon and toward her, as she ran toward him. Down the road behind her, Ake nocked another arrow. It made Gray wish that he, too, had been smart enough not to get too close to the demon. He signed to Decea that they should both retreat but she skidded to a halt, threw her arms wide, and sent ripples of windy Essence outward to disturb the snow around her. As Gray approached her, erymanthus at his heels, Decea wrote glowing spirals in the air around her, alternating blue and black.

Gray had no time to guess exactly what Decea was doing, but it looked to require all her concentration. He decided that if a coward like Decea could stand her ground against a demon, he could at least keep it away from her. He skidded to a halt a few paces from her, pivoted on one snow-slicked foot, and took an unsteady, backhanded swing at the demon. The erymanthus knocked the axe askew with a claw and reached, far too quickly for its bulk, to grab him by the neck with its other claw. But Gray allowed the lightness of fire to suffuse his body and twirled so the demon's cruel claw only grazed his throat.

Gray grinned at the demon, red light streaming from his eyes and fingertips, and would have struck again if not for the sound of the ocean.

Water streamed from Decea's open palms, spiraling outward through the air like serpents. The water became a sheet, then a flood, and wrapped around her and Gray. Soon it was a dome of water, as clear as glass, and Gray was so shocked he forgot to hold his breath. But when he reflexively breathed it in, the water filled his lungs as easily and comfortably as air ever had.

A dull, reverberating tone vibrated through the dome as the demon's claws slammed into its surface and rebounded without further effect. Gray watched it, surprised for a moment, but the demon's assault was relentless. After a few moments, Gray simply backed away from it to stand by Decea.

This is a strange trick, he signed to her.

All tricks are strange until you understand them, she signed back. *The demon can't destroy the dome, but it can push its way in, given time.*

Then let's run while the water still protects us, signed Gray.

This spell already requires intense focus, replied Decea defensively. *I can't just move the dome.*

Then what good is this water? demanded Gray irritably.

It gives us time to ready ourselves, signed Decea, *and gives Nils time to get in position.*

Gray kept from looking around, as he didn't want to give the bounty hunter's position away to the demon. So instead he turned to Decea for one more moment and signed, *It's good you're here.*

Decea smiled and nodded.

Gray turned to face the demon, took a deep breath of water, and clenched his axe in both hands. He focused not on the demon's claws, but on its neck.

He focused on two thoughts: first, that demons bled, and second, that Eira needed him to live.

The erymanthus found purchase against the dome and began to pry it open with powerful claws.

Gray held his ground for another heartbeat, and then another. Just as he thought Nils might not be coming, he spotted a blur of movement just beyond the demon. Gray raised his axe.



No wall had ever withstood the erymanthus' wrath for long, and the demon saw no reason why a dome of water would differ. As it stood on the cusp of breaking through the annoying impediment, the dome abruptly collapsed, like a ribcage crumbling into powder. All of the demon's strength and weight betrayed it, and it fell a step forward.

That wouldn't have been so terrible, except it had forgotten the snare its prey had used to snag it. Another human, unnoticed by the demon until this moment, hauled at the tangled snare and pulled the erymanthus' leg from under it. The demon toppled face-forward into the snow. But its prey was there, just in front of it, and it had its orders. The erymanthus would die soon, and a dead erymanthus couldn't keep a captive. It would have to kill him.

The erymanthus rejoiced at an opportunity for honest mayhem and opened its bloody maw to unleash its final weapon. Unclean Essence roiled in its chest and escaped as a roar that could crack stone and shatter bone. Its prey was just in front of it, and had nowhere to flee, no chance to react.

But a voice rang out, a human voice carried clearly on the wind, and it called for the demon's prey to "Look out!" The Exalt heeded the warning and leapt upward, borne on a burst of hot air, so the wave of punishing sound passed beneath him, and blasted the female human just behind him instead.

Frustrated, the demon looked up, and saw its prey descend upon it with a flaming axe and a single, well-aimed strike.



Gray yanked his axe out of the erymanthus' skull and raised the weapon for another strike, but the demon did not move. Its tough skull was cracked like an egg, and its face was slack and misshapen now. Gray grinned at it and shouted a brief roar at it, a mockery of the demon's own awful noise, before turning away.

This was when he saw Decea sprawled upon the snow, blown several yards back by the demon's desperate counterstrike. He rushed to kneel at her side and shook her shoulder. She didn't react any more than the demon did, and Gray let out a very different sound, something alarmed and afraid.

Ake arrived a few moments later, and warded Gray back with a firm gesture. He set his ear to Decea's lips, took off a glove, and laid his hand upon her throat. After a few moments of silence, he said, "Her blood still runs strong, and her breath is not labored. She will be well, child."

Gray smiled at Ake, not thinking for once of how unsettling his fangs might look. Ake smiled back.

"I'm sure we're all relieved," said the bounty hunter, walking around the rank demon's corpse to squat by the small gathering. "But it seems to me we're still missing somebody. Where's Eira?"

Gray shot back to his feet at the reminder of Eira's plight. When he looked back down at Decea, torn, Ake told him, "Go on, boy. I'll look after her." Gray didn't need to be told again.

Gray ran back to the watermill, but he didn't rush headlong. He recalled the killers who lurked in the fog, and though the air had cleared, they might wait anywhere. When he reached the river, and saw Eira lying face-down and alone, exactly where he had left her, he paused. Gray knew bait when he saw it.

He also didn't see her breathing, so he didn't pause long.

Gray looked left and right as he approached his friend. The river was more than ten paces away, and so was the mill itself. No wasp flew overhead, and the snow revealed no tracks that signaled an ambush. He reached the gray-haired mortal woman...and raised his axe, even as he quietly knelt by her. With his teeth, he pulled off one glove, to reach for her neck, as he'd seen Ake do.

Eira was cold, too cold to be healthy, but he felt a pulse and sighed with relief.

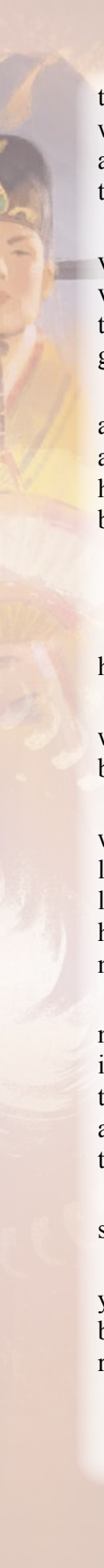
Gray drew a cold breath back in as a too-warm hand reached from behind to cover his mouth. He felt a pinprick just beneath his chin, and pushed back against whatever held him. The arms held him, painlessly but firmly, and Gray found his vision swimming.

"Shhh," whispered a gentle voice in his ear. "Quiet now. Rest now. All will be well."

He didn't believe that promise. The fire within him demanded he act, but his arms and legs no longer responded. The cold of the day gave way to a warm and dreamless slumber.



A neomah is no warrior or brute, and they do not approach their orders as an erymanthus might. Neomah are masterful courtiers, able to align themselves to the strange and wicked intrigues of demons and to the varied demands of Exalted mas-



ters with equal ease. Where the demon-ape disdains the ability to vanish from the world, the demon courtesan knows when to wait unseen, and when to arrive upon any scene. They pluck passions as musicians pluck strings, and they readily learn the ways of intrigue.

This neomah had found, over years of service, that poison was a remarkably varied tool, and that humans — even Exalted, to a lesser extent — were remarkably vulnerable to it. The neomah preferred nonlethal drugs when orders permitted, for they weren't cruel. The young Exalt with the fascinating ancestry slumped in their grasp and grew still. He would be heavy to carry, but the neomah had their orders.

When they heard the weight of a footstep upon the snow, they turned with apparent grace that belied the fear they felt. They saw a man with a sword, his skin all but concealed by heavy furs, but he carried himself as might a man who knew he was good to look upon. The neomah had tasted his shape before, in the space between words as they interrogated the mortal woman Eira.

“Bounty hunter,” the demon said, by way of polite greeting.

“Demon,” replied the bounty hunter, with a respectful nod.

“I am bound to capture this boy,” said the demon. “I owe you and your fellow hunters no harm and bear you no hatred.”

“I fear I'm bound to save him,” said the bounty hunter. “A witch has plied me with spirits' tears, and she won't keep me dosed with antidote if I don't track the boy down and return him.”

The neomah smiled. Though the mortal's face was concealed, and though he was doubtless a skilled prevaricator, his body spoke volumes. The more casual he looked, the more he feared what powers the neomah might possess. The less he looked at Eira, the more he feared for her safety, here in the cold. And he spoke of his binding because he yearned to be free, for that was the nature of humans, in the neomah's experience.

“You speak of Decea the betrayer?” asked the demon, and the mortal's merest nod confirmed. “Eira did not give away any names, but there is much to be gleaned in what a human does not say. I know Decea. I studied poison at her side and can tell you how to make the antidote for yourself. Let me take the boy to my master, and you may take your friend Eira home to safety. She will wake in a few hours' time. She is the only one here you care for, is she not?”

Nils looked down at the older woman. “...she came on this hunt for the boy's sake. To repay a debt.”

“The boy is Exalted,” said the demon, “and caught up in troubles greater than you can weather. The Bruin will devour Eira's soul, if the Wanasaan don't crush her between them first. I have heard it said that a bounty hunter must learn to measure risk against reward. What debt would be worth her life, or yours?”

Nils let out a long, slow breath.



chapter seven

One More Loss

Decea awoke from darkness to the wavering light of a fire. Her head pounded, and her vision swam. She was sitting upright, but not by choice. A voice called her name, distant and distorted, as if she were underwater. She felt sick to her stomach. After a timeless confusion, she recognized Nils' scarred face, and his voice asking a question:

“Can you hear me?”

Decea mumbled a response, several times, until Nils understood. He looked into her hemlock-wood box and found a crumb of lightning-amber. He handed it to her, and she crushed the crumb into a powder between two fingers. She rubbed the powder on her gums, and knew it was working from the tingle and tang of metal on her tongue. Alertness returned to her in a rush, and with it came memory and clarity of thought.

First, Decea recognized the erymanthus' roar had jolted her head badly (along with all her muscles and joints), a condition that had shaken her thoughts and sense of balance. Second, she realized that the warping of Nils' voice was not just due to her confusion. The erymanthus' roar had damaged her hearing, and she needed to watch Nils' mouth to fully follow his words.

Third, Decea sat up and took in her surroundings. They were indoors — in some abandoned home, judging by the remnants of furniture — with a blazing fire in the hearth. Ake was there, tending to the fire, and to an unconscious Eira.

The lightning-amber granted Decea enough clarity to notice what was missing: “Where's Gray?”

“A neomah took him. Ordered by a sorcerer. Cousin of yours, I assume.”

“Bagra. I think.” Erymanthoi and neomah were common sorcerers' tools, but agatae were more unpredictable, and few of the Wanasaan preferred to summon them. “Does she know I'm here?”

Nils just looked at Decea for a moment, and she reached up and grabbed his collar. “Does she know I'm here?” she hissed.

Nils yanked Decea's hand away, and the sudden movement made her world swim. Decea covered her eyes in a vain attempt to ease her nausea.

She could still hear Nils, though, as he said, “Gods save me from friends like you, lady. I tell you Gray was taken by a demon and your first worry is for your own hide?”

Decea started in a commanding tone, “Nils—”

“No,” said the bounty hunter, “you listen to me, Decea. That demon told me how to cure myself, hoping I’d run off on you, so I helped myself to your apothecary box. I don’t know if you ever really poisoned me, but I’m cured now even if you did. You don’t have no power over me, and you can barely sit up. So, if you want something from me, you ask. Just like you were a lowly mortal.”

Decea retched. It wasn’t meant to interrupt Nils, but he did stop talking. He didn’t start again while she caught her breath, either. He waited.

“Why didn’t you?” she eventually asked. “Run off, that is.”

Nils thought for a few moments. “Last night, in the stars, I saw an ending for the Sorcerer.”

“The Sorcerer is the constellation of those who hold powerful secrets,” said Decea, “Of Exalts and of demons. It could refer to me, or Bagra, or Gray, or...”

“Or all of you,” said Nils. “And me, too. I realized it while facing off with that demon, that they and I and you were all just alike. All playing our games, keeping our secrets, each planning our own betrayals to come out on top. If we don’t stop, we’ll kill each other off or die alone in the cold, and then who’ll be there for Eira and the old man?”

Decea moved her head slowly to look at Ake and Eira. Eira stirred, groggily, as Ake hummed a traditional song to her. Decea recognized the signs of a drugged mortal.

“I didn’t expect a bounty hunter to care about anything but money,” said Decea.

“A bounty hunter’s got to eat,” said Nils. “But who wants to eat alone?”

Decea was quiet for a few moments. “I’m going to need a few hours to recover,” she said finally. “Perhaps a night’s rest.”

“I’ve seen injuries like yours take days,” said Nils.

“A few hours,” repeated Decea. “Can you track the demon once Eira and I have recovered?”

“I reckon I can.”

“Will you?”

“I will. You just prepare yourself for a family reunion.”



Gray was in darkness. The fire within him would not stay quenched for long, though, and in time he woke, gasping. The sound echoed from close walls, and Gray realized he lay on the rock floor of a tunnel, lit by a well-fed campfire. Smoke pooled in the tunnel’s roof above and lent a drowsing haze to the air. Glittering strata winked at Gray from the stone all around.

Not knowing where he was or how he’d gotten there, Gray first reached for his axe.

“Be at ease,” said a voice, unfamiliar despite its soothing tone. Gray saw the neomah across the campfire, on which the demon was cooking a rabbit. His thoughts were slow and confused, but memory soon returned: Eira cold on the ground, too-warm hands over his mouth, the prick of a poisoned needle. Where, he wondered, was his axe?

As if reading his mind, the demon leaned over and slid the wood axe toward Gray. He caught it and held it close, but looking in the demon’s whiteless eyes, he did not feel much better-armed than before.

Where are we? signed Gray.

“We’re in the mines, east of the abandoned town where we first met.”

What did you do to me?

“I drugged you, for I am bound to capture you and bring you to my master. I am sorry for that.”

Gray considered this for a time. *Did you do the same to my friend?*

The neomah smiled, and Gray — who was no student of facial expressions — could read in their wonderfully communicative face an apology and an encouragement to be without fear. “I did, but she will be well as you are well. The mortal bounty hunter came to take her to safety, away from Exalted conflict.”

Gray wasn’t sure how he felt about this. He didn’t trust Nils and felt as if the man had taken away Gray’s friend. But he also knew that was selfish, for his mother had taught him that everyone had different capabilities, and the monstrous demon that nearly killed him could have crushed her mortal body utterly. What he did feel, fairly clearly, was anger at the masked woman who’d ordered all of this, and at the demons that carried out her commands.

So why, he signed, have you given me back my axe? Why not keep poisoning me, so I couldn’t fight back and escape you? What do you want from me, demon?

The neomah looked away, as if saddened, which Gray found absurd. They had drugged and kidnapped him, and they had the audacity to act wounded? He clapped to get their attention and signed emphatically, *Answer me.*

The demon met Gray’s eyes, and Gray saw in those dark, expressive eyes a lack, a void he understood well despite never seeing it in another soul.

The demon signed, not quite as Gray signed, but in their own way, using marvelously expressive body language that Gray thought even animals must understand. They signed, *I thought you might understand what it’s like to be alone in Creation. What it’s like to be called demon, instead of any name. I thought we might talk.*

Gray’s chest hurt, but not from his sensitive ribs. The pain came from within, and Gray remembered the first time he had killed a bird, not because it would be worth eating, but because he wanted to, and it was easy. Gray remembered thinking it was the beast in him that made him do it. Over the years, he had realized cruelty was a human thing, and something he wanted no part of.

And, he had to admit, the rabbit cooking on the fire smelled amazing.

He came to sit closer to the demon, and set his axe to the side, though still in arm's reach. *What is your name?* he asked.

"I like the name Pevec," said Pevec.



Day turned to evening, and evening to night.

In an abandoned mining town, a hunting party swallowed fear and frustration so their bodies might be ready for the day to come. Eira spoke of the masked sorcerer's heartlessness, and of the beauty of the demon-wasp. Decea taught the mortals about demons and their ways, about the erymanthus' hunger, the agata's strange philosophies, and the forge-fire that burned inside each neomah. Ake told stories, of the days of his childhood, of the ancestors he'd known, and of daily town life, such as Decea had never experienced. Nils stayed quiet and watchful, for though Decea understood how he could let Gray be taken without a fight, how he acted on the Elknellfolk's behalf, the Elknellfolk themselves were slow to forgive.

Something about the night was different. The Wanasaan were close by — they might return at any moment — but Decea did not feel frightened. She had no choice but to face them, she thought, but she wouldn't be alone when she did so. Though they were mortals and fragile, for one night, that was a comfort. And if Bagra wanted to control Gray or use him as leverage against Decea, well, Decea knew from personal experience how difficult the young Fire Aspect was to keep under thumb. He would not be Bagra's to keep.



Gray and Pevec talked for hours in near silence. It was no academic exchange, as Gray had with Decea, but an exploration of two like selves. Gray spoke of his dreams, and of his losses and frustrations. He spoke of the cruelty of humans, of adults and children, and of the exhilaration of realizing he might be more. He spoke of the freedom to go where and do what he wished, and of the sorrow that his mother would not ever see it. He did not speak of his anger, but Pevec knew it all the same.

Pevec spoke of their passions, and though — or because — they were not all human passions, Gray found them fascinating. Then and now, sorcerers summon neomah for their attractiveness and cleverness, but each neomah is at heart a maker of flesh, meant to forge children for those who have none, from scraps of parents' flesh and blood. Pevec spoke of their fascination with physiognomy and ancestry, and the beautifully strange family history written in Gray's fur and muzzle. They spoke, at times, of the constant clangor and casual cruelty of the hell that birthed them, but they spoke far more about what it was like to be a student of body language in a human society of spoken words.

Decea and Gray thought of each other, too, and what stories they would tell when they saw each other again. They hoped for each other's safety, for they each heard the cries of the dead, echoing up and out of the darkened mine throughout the night.



Once, when Creation was full of wonders now forgotten, there was a plague. A Great Contagion spread across the world, defying potent medicines and the dictates of disease spirits. Whole nations rotted, and cities went fallow. When all other protections failed, humanity relied on isolation and fire to slow the tide of death.

There had once been a city in a Northern mountain, a place of dim and quiet wonders. Scholars debate to this day its true name and location, for the maps have changed much since those days. It was rumored to be a haven from the Contagion, and many desperate pilgrims froze to death on their journeys to seek it out.

It was just as well they never found it. The city's residents had collapsed all tunnels leading into their glorious city, to hide away from the plague. And when the Contagion bloomed in the city's outer caverns, they sealed those off, too. And so on, and so on, ever inward, until that once-great city was left an unclean, unquiet grave. So great was the weight of death in that city that it sank halfway into the Underworld. Strange things crawled from that labyrinthine darkness and made the city their home.

The miners who re-opened those collapsed tunnels never reached the city's cold heart. They could have mined the ancient city's edges for decades, reclaiming carefully cut gems and stone worked by wondrous, forgotten methods. But the tunnels defied their maps at night, and some of those miners lost their way, and a creature that had slumbered for many years awoke ravenous.



Gray awoke by habit in the early morning, and realized he'd been asleep. He'd talked with Pevec late into the night, first by the campfire, then by the warm light of Gray's own anima, then in darkness, signing hand to hand, as he'd used to do with the trapper. Gray flicked a short-lived spark into life, dancing at his fingertips, and in its light saw Pevec lying next to him, eyes open and watching him.

Gray didn't know how to feel about that, so he just asked, *You didn't sleep?*

They shook their head, and it meant, *I don't sleep.*

Gray didn't know how to feel about that either, so he asked, *What now?*

Now we go together, to see my master. Pevec's eyes were serious, even imploring.

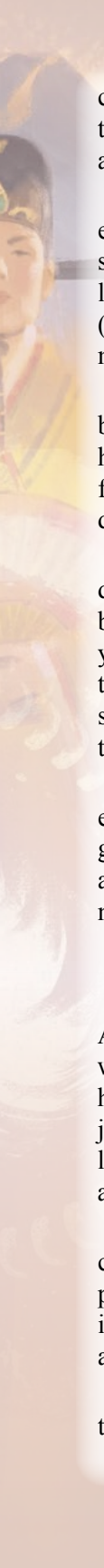
What will you do if I try to leave you? asked Gray.

Do you want to leave me? asked Pevec.

Gray had trouble looking away from Pevec's large, dark eyes. He sighed. *Let's go.*



Decea had wrapped Eira's ankle tightly, and brewed a concoction overflowing with wood Essence for the hunter to drink, to speed the healing process. Decea herself needed only an evening of sleep to recover her wits and balance, though the bright morning sunlight still gave her a headache. The two women awoke ready to



challenge the mines, both eager to rectify Gray's loss. Ake was anxious but did not try to argue with them. Nils was sanguine; if he died, it would be on his own terms, and that was what mattered to him most.

The neomah clearly knew or cared nothing about hiding their trail, so it was easy enough to track them up the mountain. The mountainside was littered with scrub-flowers and tomb-lichen, telltale plants that grew on the outskirts of shadowlands. Now that Decea had the energy to worry about Gray once more, she hoped he (or the demon) had been wise enough not to explore the mines at night, when they might lead deeper into the Underworld.

The trail led up to a mineshaft, left open by miners who hadn't cared to seal it behind them. Eira led the way into the dark, spear out in front of her, with Nils at her side. Decea directed them from behind, holding high a lantern she'd recovered from the abandoned town. Ake kept a careful ear out, for Decea's hearing was still dulled from the day before.

They moved quietly, and soon found the remains of a small campsite, abandoned not an hour before. Sooty footprints suggested Gray was walking, now, not being carried. Decea wondered what a demon might threaten or promise a naive young man to secure his cooperation, but it hardly mattered. If he found trouble, the hunting party would know soon enough. They searched onward, checking for signs of Gray's passage, but they did it quietly, for the dead and the Wanasaan had to be somewhere in the mines.

In time, they came upon the skeletal ruin of a tower in a rubble-crowded cavern. Its surface was marble, carved and polished to a mirror sheen, decorated with golden runes that glittered in the lamplight. It reached up, beyond their lamplight and out of sight, older than any of them could say. Despite their caution, Eira could not help letting out a low whistle of appreciation.



Pevec had told Gray the night before that Dragon-Blooded graced with the Aspect of Fire were born soldiers, and he was happy to prove it, striding ahead with one hand holding his axe and the other holding a torch Pevec had made while he slept. Old corpses lurked in the ruins, little more than weathered skeletons, but just as hungry as the creatures he'd burned in Elknell. The first of the hungry dead lunged at him stupidly from the shadows, and he dispatched it simply enough with an axe blow to the chin.

But the deeper into the mines they went, the more cunning the creatures became. A few ran off when they saw his fire and learned to attack the weaker-looking prey behind him. Pevec might not have been human, but tantalizing blood flowed in their veins, too. Gray thought that if he were flesh hungry, Pevec would look appetizing to him, as well.

The worst of the ambushes came when a trio of the hungry dead jumped from the crumbling parapets of an ancient tower, unafraid of the long fall. Pevec spotted

them and called out a warning, and Gray leapt up to meet the dead. He stuck his axe deep into the chest of one creature, whirled in the air, and swung the corpse around by the axe's haft to knock one of its companions off course. The third slipped past him, and though Pevec was not so aggressive as Gray, the neomah nimbly rolled out of harm's way. The corpse struck stone with a crunch of breaking bones.

From above, Gray saw the corpse writhe, too stubborn and hungry to stay still, and he called out a warning. He need not have bothered: Pevec spat a gout of flame that engulfed the ancient corpse. As Gray landed, he saw that Pevec was unharmed, and the two grinned at each other. Pevec had told Gray that, like him, neomah held a forge-fire within, but he hadn't imagined how literal that might be.

For all that he shared the blood of the Dragons with Decea, Gray marveled that he could share so much with a demon. It was a good feeling...one he found he was immediately afraid to lose.

Hide from the world of flesh and blood, he signed to Pevec. *It will be safer for you.*

My task is to take you to my master, replied Pevec. *Not to stay safe following where you lead.*

Gray realized, then, that he hadn't asked Pevec anything about their orders, or even about their master. He found he was afraid to ask now, for the truth might disrupt the comfort the two shared with each other. What if, he wondered, everything they'd shared the night before was simply a strategy to keep him nearby?

The moment stretched out, the two of them looking into each other's eyes, until a sound broke the silence. It was an eerie song of sorts, not too distant, and full of sorrow. Pevec's eyes widened, and the neomah broke into a run, toward the sound. Gray hesitated a moment, but he followed soon enough.



Ake was the first to hear a stirring in the passage ahead. He laid a warning hand on Decea's shoulder, and she did the same for Eira. Decea hoped to see Gray, but the figure that dashed at them from out of the shadows wore white, and muttered strains of an old song Decea remembered from her childhood on the Silent Isle.

Eira's spear caught the man in the chest, and though it stopped his sprint, it didn't slow his aggression. He reached for Eira with naked hunger in his eyes and, in the lamplight, they could see the ragged marks in his flesh and clothes, as if he'd been savaged by an animal. Ake couldn't line up a clear shot with Eira in the way, but Decea didn't need to; she tossed one of her daggers overhead, and summoned a brief, powerful gust to alter the dagger's arc and fling it down into the dead man's skull. He shuddered and slowed, confused, and Eira flung him against the stone wall. Nils stepped in to chop at the twitching corpse until it went still.

Decea crouched next to the ruined body. Once she was certain he wouldn't lunge for her, she braced his head with one hand and yanked her dagger out. "Bagra's people found the beast. Or it found them first."

“Isn’t he one of your people, too?” asked Ake. “What rites should we perform? What was his name?”

“There’s no soul left to honor or curse in this...body,” said Decea. She picked up the short sword the dead man had dropped and raised it over his bloody head. “But we should make sure he doesn’t get back up.”

Decea brought the blade down and felt the jarring impact of the sword on bone. And nothing else.

There was silence, until Nils turned down the corridor. “Do y’all hear someone singing?”



An agata is, by nature, a creature of fluid contradictions. It may be cruel one moment and gentle the next. It is a thing of beauty that does not fear the tarnish of blood. It obeys its master, to be certain, but throughout its dramatic life it answers to philosophies poorly understood by humans. In their demon hives, agatae live in a harmony that necessarily includes some measure of gruesome violence. To human masters, agatae seem loyal, but unpredictable when not strictly ordered.

Here, beneath the weight of the earth, an agata dragged itself from the site of a battle and found a good place to die. The light of Creation’s sun — alien to any demon, and beautiful to this agata for that reason — shone down through a crack in the mountain, illuminating the demon-wasp’s brilliant wings and carapace, stained with its own greenish ichor. It had done its duty, and had no orders left to follow. It decided, then, that there was no more beautiful way to die than to drag itself onto the broken rubble of an ancient building and pay homage to what had killed it.

So it sang, in the tongue of spirits, older than any mortal language. Translations do that ancient tongue no justice, but savants might crudely render it so:

In battle found we our untimely end,

Who sought the beast that feeds on death itself:

A foe no sting nor sorcery could rend.

A sturdy hide defeats mere dreams of wealth!

As the agata sang, it heard the approach of some creatures. It wondered if the dead had come, drawn by its song, or by the scent of its blood. It wondered if they could derive any pleasure from a demon’s gore, and wished them well of it, so long as they let it finish its song.

What use is poison when your foes are dead?

What use are wings when earth impedes your flight?

What use are hunters filled with sav’ry red?

All beauty’s useless where there is no light!

The agata's audience ran into view, and it brought some joy to the agata's recital. The agata used many names and none, but it recognized the neomah who preferred the name Pevec. Pevec shook their head, expressive features imploring the demon-wasp to cease its song, even as the strange, furry human accompanying them took in the agata's final performance, slack-jawed.

The agata did not take requests. Instead, with its lilting tones and twitching antennae, it asked the neomah to dance along. Pevec considered, then acquiesced. Their graceful movements were a perfect accompaniment, a mirror of the agata's beautiful death.

*My master's arrows, constant as the tide,
From blessed bow, an heirloom of her clan,
Were each of them by Bruin's pelt denied.
She really should have had a better plan!*

Others came, or the agata thought they did. Its vision was fading along with its voice. It could only see Pevec clearly, as their dance drew closer. The agata forced out a final few words:

*Bless Bagra, dragged to darkness by her kin,
For she and Bruin's claws have done me in.*

Pevec drew close and cradled the agata's head with one hand. With the other, the neomah carefully placed a long, deadly needle at a carapace joint, just below the agata's brain. The agata rejoiced in the perfect ending to its song as the needle slid home with the soft crunch of punctured chitin.



The neomah, who liked to be called Pevec, withdrew the needle with utmost care. It was stained with the strange, watery fluid that preserved the demon's brain. Few mortals in those days understood the nature of this vital stuff...but neomah did. For that was and is the way of the makers of flesh.

Pevec had claimed a piece of their friend and recent client, fairly taken as payment for a requested performance. From this precious fluid and enough substances taken from other clients — living or dead — Pevec could forge a strange and wondrous child. They carefully stowed the stained needle in an oil-lined bag, along with other, similar payments.

They turned and saw the cavern was fuller than they had known, that the final performance they shared with the agata had gained a larger audience. Three mortals — Nils, Eira, and an old man — had arrived for the tail end of the performance, and were stunned by it, as humans so often were. Decea of the Wanasaan had come with them, and Pevec expected her to shake off the effects far more quickly than the mortals would. But Pevec's main concern was Gray, of course.

The young man had been affected by the song, Pevec saw in his face, and likely understood its content far better for Pevec's expressive accompaniment. But the warring feelings inspired by the agata's own fierce sorrow and joy were outweighed by horror. Gray had not known that a monster like the demon-wasp could hold such emotional depth, and he had not known that Pevec could snuff out that beauty with such a calm hand.

Ah, thought Pevec, *there was that look*. The look that said, despite all they had in common, they were not truly alike at all. Pevec felt a great loss, amplified by its mirror on Gray's face.

And an important, undeniable part of Pevec also thought that they had failed to capture Gray, that he was now too protected to kill, and that with those options denied them, Pevec had one last command to follow.

They reached within, to the invisible tether of Essence that bound them to their master. Whether Bagra had died as the agata thought, or still survived, that tether remained. Pevec pulled at it, pulling themselves away from the humans and the corpse of a beautiful friend. The world began to fade from view, as Pevec took their own physical form apart, threads of fiery flesh flitting away to find their master.

Decea of the Wanasaan saw what was happening and readied a dagger. Perhaps she and her mortal servants would have swarmed Pevec, in hopes of violently interrupting the neomah's escape, but Gray thrust himself between them, shouting a wordless denial. The former exorcist gritted her teeth in frustration, but she did not press the attack.

Pevec smiled at Gray, and though their body was disintegrating, the meaning of their smile was clear: *Thank you, and goodbye for now*.



Gray watched Pevec unravel into burning motes and felt like he didn't understand anything. He felt a hand on his shoulder, and distantly heard Decea asking if he was all right, if the neomah had hurt him. He glanced at the butchered demon-wasp and didn't know how to answer the question.

Then he heard whispers and calls from the dark and knew the dead had been drawn by the song, or by his own careless shout. The sound lit a spark within him, a hot rush of readiness to fight, to destroy, to survive. One loss had given him the anger he needed to start this hunt, and another would fuel him to finally finish it.



chapter eight

The Beast

Sunlight shone down through the hole in the cavern roof above, motes of ancient dust dancing within. The light illuminated what mere torchlight could only hint at: a half-crumbled tower leaning against its upright sibling. The towers were marked with decorations and signs of purpose that none currently alive within the mountain could decipher, with sorcerous lanterns that had died long ago, leaving only cracked spheres of cloudy glass. And, thanks to the hints of sunlight that ventured into the tower windows, the hunting party could see glints of metal, and the whites of bone and withered eyes. Querulous calls and plaintive cries echoed throughout the cavern.

The city's residents were all long dead, but dozens or even hundreds had awakened, and were watching the hunting party.

"They're afraid of the sunlight, right?" asked Nils. He was working to keep his breath steady. "It's why they haven't come out to attack us?"

"Sunlight won't stay," said Eira. "The deeper we get into afternoon, the bolder they'll become."

They're cleverer than the ones we fought before, signed Gray to Decea. *Let's not wait for them to start throwing stones down at us.*

Decea translated for the mortals, then said, "If they're more coordinated, then it might be the Bruin's influence. If that's the case, they'll want to capture us, or at least taste our blood fresh. I think we're safe from projectiles, until they get desperate."

Ake grunted. "I'm feeling a little desperate myself."

"Take a few breaths," said Decea. "If we stop thinking clearly, we'll suffer the same fate as Bagra and her people."

Gray sifted through the memory of Pevac's supernaturally expressive dance, searching for practical information and storing the rest away for later. *The beast's hide was too thick to pierce,* he signed. *I remember that from when I fought it, too. But I took its eye. It can be hurt.*

"Could either of you take its other eye with an arrow?" Decea asked Ake and Eira.

"If it stood still," said Ake, "and if we have enough light."

The beast doesn't fear the sun, signed Gray. *It attacked at sunrise.*

“Better to fight it here anyway,” said Eira, “than to corner a bear wherever it sleeps. Your cousin clearly wasn’t much of a hunter, Decea.”

If Decea felt anything about that, she didn’t show it. Instead, she said, “Then we need to draw it here, before we lose the light.” She reached into a secret pocket in her sleeve and produced a small clay pill. “This is a spiritual poison made from...well, it’s best you don’t know. It can bring a person near enough death that their soul partially leaks out of their body. If the Bruin can track ghosts by scent, it should be irresistible.”

“...that looks just like the antidote pills you gave me,” said Nils, looking straight at Decea.

“It isn’t,” said Decea, looking away.

“But I wouldn’t have known that,” said Nils. “And you had it ready for today.”

Decea finally met the bounty hunter’s eyes. “Are you surprised?”

“I’m really not,” said Nils, disgusted. “And I ain’t taking it, neither.”

Gray, Ake, and Eira all tried to volunteer at once. After a brief argument, Eira spoke firmly. “I’m not as good a shot as Ake, and I can’t set the cursed beast on fire. Should be me.”

“Your ankle isn’t healed yet,” said Decea. “You won’t be able to run if — when the Bruin comes.”

“Makes me better bait,” said Eira. She held her hand out for the pill.

In the ensuing silence, Decea handed it over.



There was a creature once, a nightmare of death that fed upon death. Nightmares have some power in the Underworld, but far less in Creation — it couldn’t walk the world of the living and didn’t understand why it would want to. It could only feed upon scraps left behind as ghosts sought oblivion until, one awful day, a wayward mortal animal died, lost in the Underworld where it didn’t belong.

Animals have no souls — not as scholars know them, at least — but they can die. And for all its years of feeding on what death created, the nightmare of this tale had never before tasted the moment of death itself. And it would never be satisfied without that taste again.

The nightmare reveled in the taste of fresh death and burrowed into the beast’s dead flesh to consume every crumb of its Essence. Then it rose up upon paws and limbs it didn’t have before and followed the animal’s trail back into the land of sun and light, a world of living prey. And, when it ran out of food, it slept for many long years until prey finally came to its lair and let it taste the air of the outside world.

Today, the beast was wounded, peppered with arrows and blades. It was scarred and half blind. The beast understood fear, knew to avoid well-lit towns with torches and blades, but worse than any injury was the ever-present pain of hunger.

The beast smelled fresh prey, here in its vast subterranean home, and could not resist.



Eira stood in the sunlight, breathing heavily. She had kept her spear level, pointing alternately at a few tunnels that the Bruin could come through, for a while. But as the poison swirled through her, and her blood slowed in her veins, her spear tip gradually dropped. She had sustained her share of injuries, and her share of losses, but she had never felt so...empty inside. As if she was no longer truly present, but just an echo of the woman that had been.

It made her think of her sister. At first, she resisted the thought, but as she faded further from the living world and her vision dimmed, Eira took solace in memories long past. She remembered their childhood, their parents and older siblings. She remembered their shared hopes, their shared losses. She remembered asking her sister to be careful, and she remembered realizing that she, Eira, was the last in their family. No spouse, no children, no plan for the future. No siblings coming home.

Eira didn't need to survive, necessarily. She'd hunted the dead with Nils, and hunted this beast with the Exalted, thinking of them as good ways to die. But she did, above all, want to be remembered. Eira was brave, and she didn't leave her debts unpaid, and that would be enough.

To her right stood Gray, axe drawn and torch at the ready, prepared to defend her, eager for a fight. To her left stood Decea, wielding a knife in each hand, trying not to panic at any sudden sounds. Nils and Ake had found a perch on a toppled arch, where traces of sunlight still reached. When the dead inevitably came, Ake would have Nils to protect him, as the old man needed to aim without distraction.

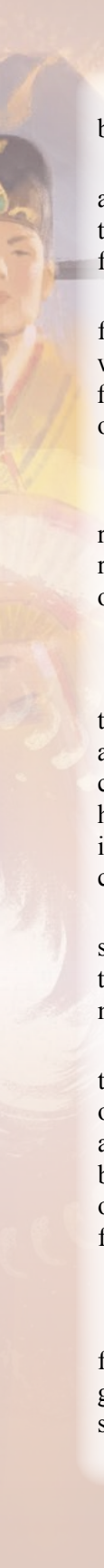
Eira was the first to see the Bruin come out of the shadows, but the last to react. She had known it would be large, but hadn't truly understood how she would feel, seeing it. Bristling with snapped arrows, face scarred by flame, it still had such power in its form that she couldn't imagine slowing it down, let alone harming it. It could casually snap her spear, or her body, and she felt its sole remaining red eye fix on her.

Eira was already dead in her mind, and when Nils whistled out a warning, she didn't blink or lift her spear off the floor.



Decea couldn't help watching Eira. Though the others couldn't see it, Decea could see Eira's soul wavering and slipping loose from her body, a strange double image, as if Decea had let her eyes unfocus. She hoped the dose wasn't too strong — Decea had measured it precisely for Nils, who was younger and taller, and might survive it longer without the antidote.

Then the bounty hunter whistled, and Decea's gaze snapped to the massive creature lumbering into the light with surprising stealth and grace. The Bruin had black fur that sprouted from bone-white flesh. It was ten feet tall at the shoulder, and as soon as it saw that it was outnumbered, it rose up onto its hind legs, head rising above even above Nils and Ake, who stood at an elevation. The beast roared, overpowering all other sound.



Gray roared back, though nobody could hear it, and he charged the beast, a burst of heat propelling him forward.

The Bruin brought its great claws down to crush Gray, but he remembered this attack from before, and dropped low to slide past. He dragged axe and torch along the beast's belly as he slid, and the Bruin leapt forward in pain, eager to get away from the surprisingly quick source of fire.

Seeing the beast leap toward her and Eira, Decea's fear and worry took over for a moment. She shouldered Eira aside, out of the way of the Bruin's bulk, and was knocked sprawling by a quick swipe from the beast. Decea slid along the stone floor, out of the sunlight, until her back struck a wall. Her breath briefly knocked out of her, Decea looked up to see Ake loose his first arrow.

It glanced off the bear's shoulder, clattering off into darkness.

Decea moved to stand, inadequate-seeming dagger at the ready, only for her rabbit-fur coat to squeeze tight against her throat. Here in the darkness, dead hands reached out from a nearby window and grasped her by her hood. She tried to call out for help or summon the concentration to shape a spell and could do neither.



Gray was concerned about Decea, but he was more concerned by the fact that the Bruin was fighting more cautiously now. It stayed low to the ground, swiping at him every time he came near, and shifting to block him every time he tried to circle it. Even worse, Eira seemed too stunned or insensate to move and defend herself. Gray had to be careful, or he might lead the Bruin to casually crush Eira in its rampage. For all that the mortal hunter had spoken about making good bait, Gray couldn't bring himself to risk her safety any more than she'd already done.

Gray retreated slightly, drawing the Bruin back toward the shadows beyond the sunlight's edge, close to where Nils and Ake waited. If he misjudged his distance, the dead would surely take him from behind and pin him for the Bruin's convenience, or the beast would take a swipe at the mortals. But what choice did he have?

As the Bruin approached Gray, Ake let loose another arrow. This one stuck in the beast's sensitive nose, and it roared in fury. The deafening sound and deathly odor of its breath overwhelmed Gray's senses, and he swung his axe wildly. It stuck and grew tangled in the tough, matted fur of one of the beast's forepaws, which the beast yanked back and away from him. By instinct, Gray dropped his torch to hold onto his axe with both hands and found himself hauled off his feet by the Bruin's fearsome strength.



Decea brought her dagger up and cut away the clasp of her coat, freeing her from the grasp of the dead. She scrambled forward into the safety of the light, gasping for air, and saw Gray desperately holding onto the beast as it thrashed to shake him off. He couldn't get purchase enough to strike at it, and if he let go or was

thrown, the Bruin would certainly descend upon him. Ake couldn't possibly get a clear shot at the beast with Gray swinging wildly in his way, and Decea wasn't sure her daggers would fare much better.

The beast was too strong, too resilient, too entrenched in this death trap of a mountain. Bagra had apparently met her end fighting this monster, and she'd been a deadlier sorcerer than Decea, and armed with an old and powerful heirloom weapon of the Wanasaan. Decea keenly felt that she had little to offer in a fight like this and cursed herself for humoring Gray's foolish vendetta.

Decea's eyes rose from the beast, past ancient tomb-towers, to the distant hole in the ceiling, a hundred feet or more above her. She felt sick to her stomach, but knew she had no true options remaining. She gritted her teeth and focused her will to reshape the world.

Fierce winds whipped around Decea as she wrote black-and-blue runes upon her flesh.



Ake saw the light in the cavern change out of the corner of his eye. "What's she doing?" he asked Nils.

"Keep your eye on the beast," said Nils. As Decea burst into a flock of black birds, swirling through the sunlight and up, up toward the distant light, the bounty hunter kept a purposefully light, steady tone. "Think of nothing but the shot. You can do this."

And he thought that everyone who'd ever trusted Decea was a fool.



Black birds swirled through the air, dodging stone cornices and the grasping hands of the dead, high enough to taste the fresh air blowing past the hole in the mountain, to glimpse the sky beyond. But they turned, and swirled, and came together in the air, and resolved into the shape of a woman. She came to herself, and her wits, a hundred feet from the cavern floor, and began to fall.

She could call upon the air, she knew, to slow her fall, and land her gently. But she didn't do that. Instead, she called it to guide her trajectory, faster and faster, inexorably down toward the target of the great black monster.

As Decea fell, she focused her will and her mind upon sorcery once more. The cold of the distant frozen spring, forever in her heart, crystallized her thoughts, and laid the complexity of her spell clear in her mind. Lines of Essence spiraled around her as she fell, and the roar of the tide echoed throughout the cavern. An impervious sphere of water swirled into being around her, and she closed her eyes in terror as the cavern floor raced up to meet her.

She felt, but could not see, her anima flaring out into the shape of a great blue-and-black gull, opportunistic, free, and descending on its prey.



The translucent sphere of water fell upon the Bruin like a boulder, crushing it into the cavern floor with a pained cry. The sphere rolled off and collapsed into mere water a moment later, but the beast was stunned, laid low for a mere moment. In that moment, Ake loosed an arrow straight into its good eye.

The beast let out a roar of pain and confusion, and rose up once more, unsteady but filled with a deadly rage. Gray extricated his axe from the beast's fur and rolled away just as it rose upright and swiped blindly, desperate to clear away the smaller creatures that had wounded it.

There was a moment of uncertainty as the blinded Bruin sought its tormentors, and the humans all stayed still. The swirling wind and flame of Decea's and Gray's animas were difficult for its sensitive ears to miss, but those sounds now meant pain. The beast also smelled souls, living souls, one more enticing than the rest.

Eira stood at the edge of the sunlight, pale as snow, eyes unseeing. The Bruin marshaled its remaining strength and lumbered toward her, unsteady but unstoppable, maw opened wide. Decea called out to the hunter, but no matter how well the air carried them, words meant nothing to Eira.

Gray, unused to words, simply ran. His feet trailed fire as he poured as much power into his legs as they would take. His anima burst into true flame around him, and he looked to all like a wolf made of flame as he outpaced the beast, in time to leap between mortal and monster. What little fire remained in him, he focused into his axe, and flung the red-hot weapon into the Bruin's open mouth, where it lodged in the great beast's throat.

The beast made an awful, pained sound, and stumbled, but it was too big and too surprised to stop. It barreled into Gray and trampled him underfoot. It would have done the same to Eira, but Nils had started running for her the moment Ake's arrow found its mark, and he tackled her out of the beast's path.

The Barrow-Bruin crashed into an ancient stone tower, sparking a cacophony of calls from the hungry dead inside. It heaved and pawed at its throat, but Gray's axe was firmly lodged within. Blood pumped down its slack jaw, and it fell upon its back, writhing and choking, until its blood slowed to a trickle and its unnatural life came to an end.

The dead let out a chorus of moans, horrified at the loss of some connection only they and the beast had understood, and fled into the dark.



Ice cracked and fell away as Decea rose to her feet. The killing cold of her anima froze the water around her and would harm any of the mortals if she got too close. But the Essence of the Dragon-Blooded knows its like, and she rushed to Gray's side without fear that either Exalt's anima would harm the other. The light pouring from them twined together, blue and red, rising up and out through the hole in the cavern's roof. It illuminated the cavern and cast deep shadows, for it was brighter than the distant sun.

Gray's belly and thigh had each taken deep punctures from the Bruin's claws as it ran over him, which welled up blood that sizzled in his anima's heat. He signed, *I'm fine*, but that didn't stop Decea from fussing over him.

"You'll *be* fine," she acknowledged, for his Exalted constitution had already slowed the bleeding, "assuming that monster's claws didn't carry some terrible disease."

Help Eira, Gray signed.

Decea saw Nils speaking to Eira, but the hunter lay insensate in his hands. To Decea's eyes, Eira's soul had almost severed its tie to her body. But Decea wouldn't be able to approach her safely, so... "I'll need Nils' help."

Decea stood to approach the mortals and heard a sound like a fly buzzing. She felt a sudden, sharp pain and fell roughly to her knees. When she realized an arrowhead was jutting from her thigh, Decea let out a wail of shock and fear. She tried to push through the pain, but her leg wouldn't move, and she knew why. She pulled herself along the ground, ice crystals forming where her hands touched stone, and turned herself to face the figure stepping out of the mine's deep shadows.

"Bagra," Decea said, through tears and gritted teeth.



The Wanasaan had collected many treasures since their founding, and they held these wonders nearly as tightly as their progeny. Rare herbs, strange beasts, and objects with magical properties were commonplace on the Silent Isle, but a few such treasures were more valuable still. Artifacts made of worked jade resonate with Dragon-Blooded Essence, and channel the grace of the Five Elemental Dragons in ways both wondrous and practical.

Creation is and was a dangerous place, and many such heirlooms are weapons.

The bow, named Eight Streams Seeker, had been entrusted to three generations of Wanasaan exorcists: from Vrochi to her daughter Vathys, to her daughter Bagra. It was so named for its ability to impede and even reverse the flow of the eight great arteries known to sages. Bagra found it useful, and amusing, that the bodies of the living could so easily be made to betray themselves.



Bagra was covered in soot, dust, and blood, and only some of that blood looked to be hers. She had taken off her whalebone mask, so she might better look down upon her cousin, kneeling on the stone. Though Decea was wreathed in freezing glory, and her eyes shone a scintillating blue, it meant that she had spent much of her power, while Bagra had conserved her own. Perhaps, Decea thought bitterly, Bagra had hidden while their mortal relatives and servants fought and died.

"Put your weapon down," barked Ake, for he hadn't surrendered his vantage point, and he had his own bow trained on Bagra.

But a gout of flame leapt from the shadows behind Bagra, forcing the old mortal to flinch and fall away from the heat. Bagra's neomah stepped into view,

their stance more befitting a court than a battlefield, mirroring their master's pride. "Cower and beg forgiveness, mortal, for my master bids me to protect her, and I will do so with my life."

Ake didn't beg, but he didn't test the demon's resolve just yet, either. Instead, he said, "We've slain the beast, and have no quarrel with you. But Decea risked her life for ours, and I owe her the same."

"Dear Decea has doomed you, mortal," said Bagra, though her eyes never left Decea's. "Her friendship is poison, her courage a mere bid for attention. I wonder, did you realize she was recruiting you to interfere with the sacred work of the Wanasaan, or did she trick you into this?"

"Stop your gloating, Bagra," said Decea. "The sun is moving, and the dead may soon return." She gestured to the arrow jutting from her thigh. "Why do this? Do you really think you can force me to come home?"

Bagra clicked her tongue disdainfully. "Unlike my mother, I suffer no such illusions. You have limited mastery of sorcery, but the Flight of Separation spell is too much a part of you. You're more bird than woman. You'll always find a way to run away."

Decea's voice grew higher pitched. "Then what? You'll kill us all, to control the secrets of the Wanasaan?"

"Not you, Decea. *Never.*" Bagra shook her head, as if mystified at the suggestion. "You're Wanasaan. You're family." She leveled her bow at Gray, sitting a few feet from Decea. "But you'll clearly continue to rebel as long you're surrounded by distractions."



Whatever Decea might have said, whatever plea she might have made, Gray gave her no opportunity. His rage boiled over, inspired by some combination of Bagra's smug superiority, her cruelty to the people Gray cared most about, and her interruption of what should have been a moment of hard-earned celebration over the death of the Bruin. Snarling and ignoring the pain in his leg and gut as best he could, he forced himself to stand and lurch forward.

Bagra loosed an arrow aimed at his throat, before he could take another step. And that would have been the end for him, but Decea shouted "No!" and, desperately throwing out one hand, called upon the air to bat aside the arrow. It nicked Gray's neck, but it didn't slow him down.

Gray had lost his axe, so he scooped up the guttered torch he'd dropped in his fight against the Bruin, the torch Pevac had made. Now the neomah moved to stand between Gray and his prey. They spat forth a searing jet of flame, and it struck Gray full in the chest. Though it was no mortal-made flame he could simply ignore, his own fire overwhelmed it, so it was merely painful, not deadly. And pain didn't slow him down.

With the last burst of heat and power in him, Gray leapt into the air, soared over Pevac, and descended upon Bagra, torch trailing fresh flame behind it.

But Bagra had years more experience with her power than Gray had with his. She neither fought nor fled Gray's attack, but moved fluidly toward him. With one hand she snatched Gray's wrist, and pulled him down past her, to slam into the stone at her feet. Before Gray could recover, Bagra knelt upon his wounded belly and pressed her black jade bow into his throat. Neither the woman nor the weapon feared the heat of his anima, and for all he struggled, Gray couldn't move or breathe. He looked up into Bagra's dark eyes and saw himself reflected: a rabid, foolish beast fit only to be put down.



Decea shouted wordlessly as Bagra forced a cry of pain from Gray. But when Decea saw Nils rush past her, ready to help the boy he'd once captured, it spurred her to act as well.

Decea threw one of her knives, calling up a wind to arc it around Nils and Bagra's guardian demon. At the same time, Ake loosed an arrow of his own at Bagra's back.

With one smooth motion of her free hand, and hardly seeming to look, Bagra caught the dagger and the arrow both. She dropped them to the stone with a clatter, then looked at Decea, unimpressed. She said, "This is what happens when you surround yourself with mortal weakness, cousin. You rely on them until they break. Then their death is your responsibility."

Decea was frightened and despairing, but more than that she was angry. Her anger came out as tears, which froze and flaked away, scintillant in the fading sunlight. "If you hurt them any more," she said, words spilling out of her unbidden, "I will not rest until I've killed you. I'll use every poison, every tool I learned from surviving on that cursed island, and ruin you, cousin."

Bagra laughed. The cousins' eye contact was briefly broken by Nils and the neomah, circling each other for advantage. Bagra asked, "You? Decea the liar, the coward? Decea the gentle, who balks at violence?"

Mortal and demon backed away from each other, and the cousins saw each other once more. "Look in my eyes," said Decea, "and tell me I'm lying."



It is the way of demons to fight those who would break them, and to serve faithfully once broken. If there was a part of Pevec that resented Bagra, they did not recognize it. They wanted, most of all, to obey.

It is also the nature of neomah to read bodies, faces, relationships; or, as poets might render it, the air. A rush of cold drew Pevec's gaze for just a moment, enough to see Decea of the Wanasaa's face. Her ice-blue eyes seemed translucent, and what Pevec saw behind them was terrifying.

Pevec glanced, then, at Bagra, and saw that Bagra's pride would never allow her to surrender. Decea's threat would only drive Bagra to greater heights of ruthlessness. Pevec thought of what might end their feud and saw only grisly death.

And Pevec saw Gray, his sharp teeth clenched in pain, unable to breathe under Bagra's weight.

Bagra had seen Pevec as an extension of herself for a long time, and certainly not as a threat. And indeed, Pevec had no intention to be a threat, only to protect their master. If that meant protecting her from herself, so be it.

Pevec flicked a single needle, nearly invisible, with practiced grace and skill. Bagra noticed nothing until the needle found its target in her forehead. She had moments, then, to recognize what had happened. As the needle's narcotic poison flooded her body, she looked to the demon, and managed to say only, "You..." before collapsing, unconscious.

Pevec saw in Bagra's eyes, heard in her tone, that they must inevitably be punished when their master awoke. The demon had faced an impossible choice and would face consequences for it. But as Bagra fell and Gray gasped, filling his lungs with air, Pevec regretted nothing.



Decea was stunned by the neomah's betrayal, but Nils was quicker on his feet. He turned and rushed past Decea, braving the killing cold around her long enough to snatch up her bag and bring it to Eira. She lay on the stone, staring upward, hardly seeming to breathe at all. "What do I do?" the bounty hunter demanded of the witch.

Decea walked Nils through the process of mixing an antidotal tincture, providing her own Essence-infused blood as a magical solvent. Even as the bounty hunter mixed the cure and fed it to Eira, though, Decea saw the hunter's soul, so severed and distinct from her mortal body that Decea thought it must be too late.

They waited in dreadful silence, broken only by the sound of Eira's breathing, growing slowly stronger. When Eira opened her eyes and weakly asked "What happened?" Decea laughed aloud, filled with relief and pride.

But nobody else reacted, except to look to Decea in confusion. And Decea's relief turned cold and sick, as she realized she alone had heard the question. Though Eira breathed — though her lower soul kept the animal body alive, though Decea — the conscious part of the hunter was disjointed, neither able to fully reintegrate with its rightful home, nor to escape and reform as a true ghost.

"Hello?" called Eira in a voice only Decea could hear, as her body stared without truly seeing. "What happened? What happened?"

Epilogue

The city under the mountain kept its dead, ancient and new alike. Those that walked and hungered avoided the living that day, for they had learned to fear the roar of fire and the keen of the wind. Once the Exalted killed the nightmare that linked them, they fled to the darkest corners of their ancient and forgotten city. There they slept in lightless comfort, moldering until the day when the living would disturb them once more.

The hunting party — the heroes who taught the empty dead to fear fire and wind — spent no more time on the dead. They wanted fresh air, and sunlight, and healing, and a chance to fix their mistakes. They could find none of those things in that forgotten tomb.

Some in the party thought it safest if Bagra stayed among the dead forever. Pevac would allow no further harm to her, though, and Gray would allow no harm to come to Pevac. Decea kept her thoughts about her cousin to herself, and regretfully left the heirloom bow with Bagra. Better, she said, not to give the Wanasaan more reason to come after any of them. Only Bagra would know who truly slew the Bruin, and her pride wouldn't allow her to admit the truth to the Wanasaan. Or so Decea hoped.

Gray and Pevac exchanged some words, unseen by any other living thing, and parted ways. The hunting party left demon and summoner behind in the dark, near the lovely corpse of the agata.

Though the Exalted among the hunting party were wounded, and the mortals with them knew well the perils of extra bellies to fill on a northern journey, none of them said a word about leaving Eira behind. They found her body could walk, with guidance, and instinctively seek shelter from the cold, and that would have to be enough to get her home, however long it might take.

They all owed her a debt now, after all.



On the fifth day of their journey, as they moved through the forests east of Elknell, Gray came to walk by Decea and Eira. The other members of the hunting party had all taken turns guiding Eira, and most of them spoke to her, whether she could truly hear them or not. Gray had taken his turns, of course, but he'd been un-

comfortable each time. Eira's passive stare felt accusatory, and Gray had of course been unable to say anything to her at all.

How is she? Gray asked Decea.

She's breathing well, Decea signed back. *Her appetite is low, but her ankle seems better.*

Gray dismissed all that with a gesture. *How is she?* he repeated.

Decea sighed. *She's confused. She slips between memory and the present. Ghosts want to remember, and to be remembered. Life is...overwhelming, chaotic for her.*

Gray looked at the woman who had been so steadfast in his defense. Her expression was slack, with little of the shrewdness he recalled. He signed, hesitantly, *Would it be better for her if she truly died?*

Decea signed back, emphatically, *It would be better for her if she truly lived again.*

That's obvious, signed Gray. *Can you help her?*

Decea was far less emphatic, now. *I think so. I hope so. If I had access to my library on the Silent Isle, I could be certain. Without it...I need to do more research and testing. Nils says Fajad is our best option. A lot of educated people live there.*

Gray glanced at the bounty hunter, who was walking up ahead with Ake. *He's going with you?*

Decea made a "sort of" gesture. *He holds me responsible for what's happened to Eira, and he doesn't trust me to heal her alone.*

What about Eira? asked Gray.

We'll take her along, too, signed Decea. *She's too strange for Elknell now. Word of her condition might spread and reach the Wanasaan, and besides, you know how the town treats outsiders.*

Gray thought on that for a long while. Eventually, he asked, *Can I come, too?*

Decea smiled.



"I know you don't plan to stay in Elknell," Ake said to Nils, as they walked side by side, ahead of the rest of the hunting party, "but I'm surprised you'd travel with Decea. I got the impression you hated traveling with the Exalted."

"You got the right impression," said Nils.

"Eira wouldn't want you to spend your life looking after her, you know." Ake's tone was somber and sincere. "She's had a good number of years. If she could tell us what she wanted done with her, I...think you and I have some idea what she'd say."

"Are you familiar with the constellation of the Pillar?" asked Nils. When Ake seemed uncertain, Nils added, "Some folks call it the Yoke."

Ake nodded. “Yes, right. What about it?”

Nils looked up into the blue sky, remembering. “I don’t have too many friends, you understand. But last night I saw the Pillar rising, old man, and I believe that’s destiny telling me to stay strong. To hold onto what relationships I got.”

Ake glanced back at Eira and the two Exalts walking with her. “Including Decea and Gray?”

Nils grumbled something indistinct.



There was no fanfare in Elknell, no celebration. Nobody spoke about where they’d been, which was just as they all preferred. Decea feared recognition, and Gray didn’t know what he’d do with it if he got it.

Ake returned home to his husband and put down his bow with some relief. They would need to discuss just what to tell the townsfolk, but they didn’t need to hurry.

Nils found a band of settlers heading southwest in a small caravan of covered wagons and charmed them into taking on a few extra hands. The more he smiled, and the more mulled cider they shared, the less they felt the need to ask questions.

Gray spent one last night in the cabin where he’d grown up. It felt strangely too big and strangely too small, all at once. He sang a song of farewell his mother had taught him, something she’d sang whenever she thought of the family she’d left behind. His voice didn’t sound much like hers, but the feeling was just the same.

Decea took Eira back home, so the hunter might spend one last night in her own bed, and so Decea could take whatever supplies they might need for their journey. It was a house built for more than one person, but there was nobody there to greet them, and nobody to say goodbye. Decea slept in an empty bed, waking up only when she heard Eira calling out for a sister that didn’t appear to be coming home. But Decea had heard that plaintive call often over the last few days and expected to hear it more in weeks to come. She soon fell back asleep.



Deep in the night, Gray signed in darkness. Nobody could see it, himself included, but it wasn’t for him. It went like this:

My mother taught me that spirits can hear prayer, or at least feel it, even if it’s done silently. Decea says there are many kinds of spirits, all different, from gods to ghosts to elementals to demons. I think that if any kind of spirit can hear prayer by hand-sign, it’s you, Pevec.

I think sometimes spirits can even answer prayer. I don’t know if you can do that, but it’s okay if you can’t. You were one of the first people to really see me for who I am, and if all you can do is hear me, that’s all right. If all you can do is feel that I’m thinking about you, that’s good, too. And if all that happens is that I get to think about you...I can live with that.

Soon, I’ll be going on a new journey...



Early in the morning, before the sun rose, the town was awake and alive. The hungry dead had been quiet for more than a week, and the spring weather was warming. The people of Elknell were still anxious, bereft of the guidance of their ancestors, but the night was not so frightening.

The hunting party met once more in the home of the Wise Twain to say their goodbye to the town, and also to say one more thing.



The Dragon-Blooded are one in some ways, united by the blood of the Five Elemental Dragons who circle Creation. Though their power passes down from parent to child to grandchild, ever onward, so too does it bind itself through word and deed. Dragon-Blooded Essence knows its like, and new family can be found in the furthest edges of Creation.

There is an oath, older than history, with many traditional variations. But the truth of it lives in the blood of the Dragons, not in any ritual made by humans. Its power lives in the intent behind the spoken word, and on that day, in that place, it wasn't spoken at all.

It went like this:

Decea signed, *Decea, descendant of the Wanasaan, has found a family that was denied her, and a hearth that can warm her. She will be true to her sworn kin, who is Gray of the Aspect of Fire. She will stand by his side, and abandon him not, until the hearth of our hearts is broken.*

Gray signed, *I, Gray, recognize you, Decea, as a true friend and sister. You've helped me avenge the family I lost and taught me things about the world...about myself, that I never imagined. I'll guard you from danger, and I won't run too far ahead, for as long as you need me.*

Their animas flared, a warm red and a cold blue swirling through the hut of the Wise Twain. Something settled into them both, something they felt in their bones. For they were family now, bound deeper than mortals could know. However far they wandered, they would feel that bond, and never truly be alone again.

Gray grinned at the feeling. To both their surprise, Decea hugged him tightly. Gray decided that was all right.

Postscript

In the distant northwest of Creation, where tundra gives way to water and ice, there was once a merchant galley called *Torun's Venture*. It had reached the edges of the known world and returned to warmer climes eleven times. On the twelfth, it sank into the depths, pulling several dozen sailors and passengers down with it.

One of those passengers was a fisherwoman's daughter with a strong grip and a lot of questions about Creation and the people in it. She had nobody to stay home for, and so had decided to become a sailor. This, she realized as the ship sank, had been her first mistake. Her second mistake had been trusting a so-called hero.

This was her last thought before she drowned. But it wasn't her last thought at all.

This young woman drowned, you see, but she didn't die. She floated in the cold depths, surrounded by the lifeless corpses of her fellow sailors, buffeted by cruel waves. In lightning flashes, she saw the wreck of the ship down in the depths with her.

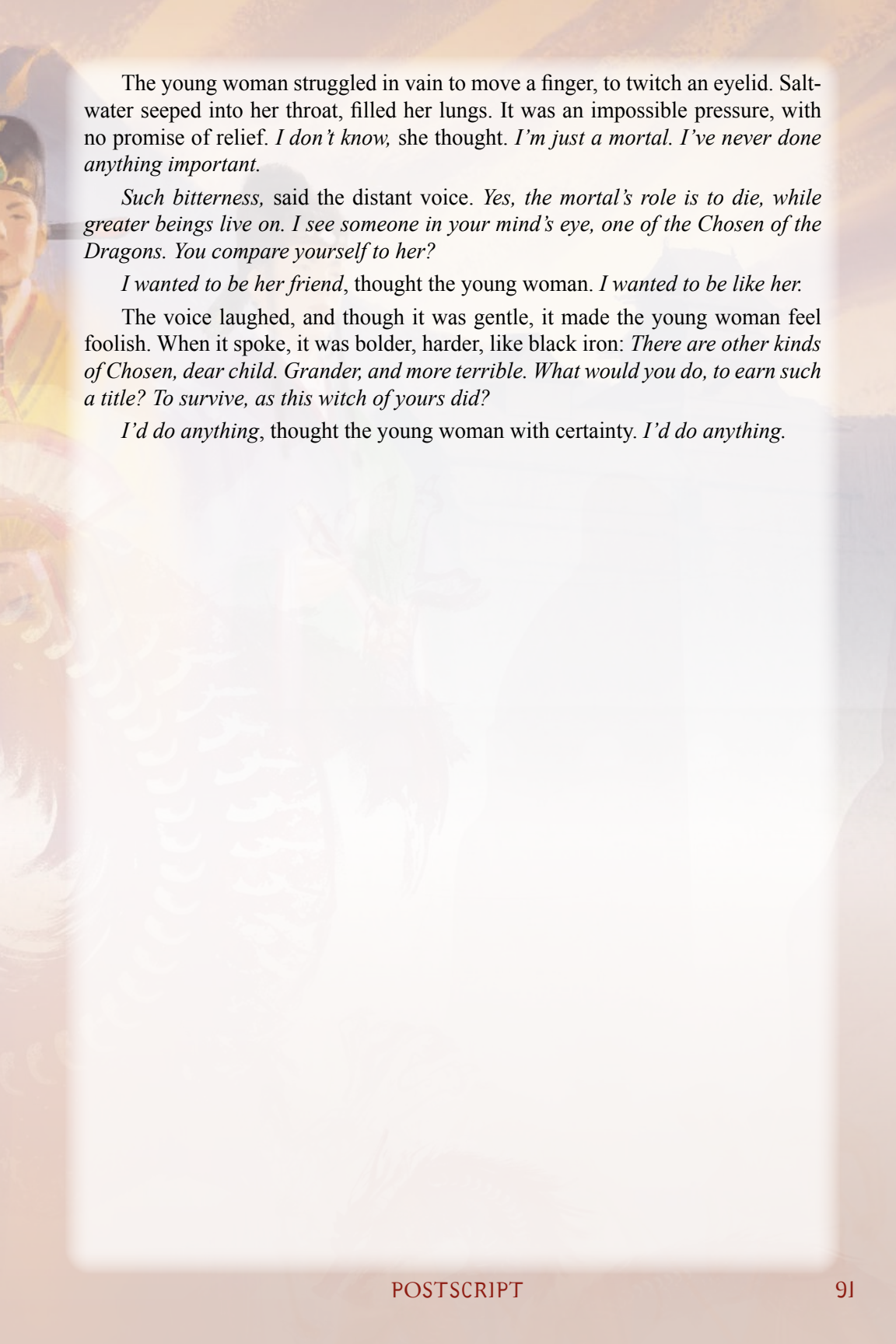
But she saw. She felt cold. She couldn't move, but she could still ask questions.

Why was she still alive? Was she still alive? Were all the dead sailors around her trapped in their skins like she was? Was this what it was like to be a ghost out at sea, drowned and drowning forever, with no land in sight? Or was she simply unique, alone, doomed to bloat in the ocean and to feel her corpse being eaten by fish?

A voice came to her, then: a patient and kindly voice, that might not disturb a mote of dust in a room left empty for centuries. It said in her head, or perhaps in her soul, *Dear child, what brought you to this low state?*

The young woman thought she must be dreaming, or hoped she might be, and held onto the sliver of hope the voice presented. Her body didn't react and her voice stayed silent, so instead she thought in a desperate rush, *I drowned, please, this isn't fair, I didn't get to live, I don't want to be alone, can you help me, whoever you are?*

The voice took its time to respond, measured and empathetic. *Dear child, we all die, and it's never fair. Do you think yourself so special, so unique, that you deserve, above all others, to survive drowning?*



The young woman struggled in vain to move a finger, to twitch an eyelid. Salt-water seeped into her throat, filled her lungs. It was an impossible pressure, with no promise of relief. *I don't know*, she thought. *I'm just a mortal. I've never done anything important.*

Such bitterness, said the distant voice. *Yes, the mortal's role is to die, while greater beings live on. I see someone in your mind's eye, one of the Chosen of the Dragons. You compare yourself to her?*

I wanted to be her friend, thought the young woman. *I wanted to be like her.*

The voice laughed, and though it was gentle, it made the young woman feel foolish. When it spoke, it was bolder, harder, like black iron: *There are other kinds of Chosen, dear child. Grander, and more terrible. What would you do, to earn such a title? To survive, as this witch of yours did?*

I'd do anything, thought the young woman with certainty. *I'd do anything.*

EXALTED

THIRD EDITION

THE SILENCE OF OUR ANCESTORS

“Decea bore the gifts and markings of the Elemental Dragon of Air, and clarity was her birthright. She stopped imposing forms on the clouds of her mind, and allowed her thoughts to wander, that she might better see the true shape of the world.”

When the Dragon-Blood Decea finds herself unexpectedly in the small fishing village of Elknell, she quickly realizes something is amiss with its living residents — and its dead. Decea sets out to find an answer, along with a mismatched group of companions, and uncovers more than she could ever have expected.

